

THE INNER LAW

UC-NRLF



\$B 794 504

WILL N. HARBEN

The Last Work of the Great Southerner

LAST month there went to final sleep one of the sweetest, rarest and most beautiful minds that the South has ever given us.

In every part of the country men and women sighed to think that from the pen of that simple and lovely soul, Will N. Harben, no more novels would come for their delight and their inspiration.

To these it will be good news to hear that in the last year he wrote the richest, the ripest, the most dramatic of all his novels. The South he knew and loved so well glows in this story.

But in this book he has touched a subject that he has never treated before. This is a tale of a woman who could not be mentioned in the Southern town in which she lived and of the wreck and devastation she brought into the lives of two innocent people.

It is a fearless and daring story. But so tactful is his touch, so lofty is his idea, that this book which in some other man's hands would be dangerous is a fine contribution to our American literature.

**The COTTAGE of DELIGHT
By Will N. Harben**

Presentation
(Copy)

Am. J. 115
(C. 1115)
(12-11)

With my best regards
to Young Robert
Reid and my best
wishes for his present
and future.

Will N. Harben

N. Y. City
Nov. 15, '17

THE I

COTTAGE OF DELIGHT

THE COTTAGE OF DELIGHT. By Will N. Harben. With frontispiece. Harper & Brothers.

THAT particular and somewhat melancholy interest which always attaches itself to a posthumous novel gives this new book by Will N. Harben an added claim to one's attention. The scene is laid principally in Mr. Harben's own familiar State of Georgia, but shifts temporarily, first to Tennessee and later to New York, returning after each divergence to Ridgeville, the Georgia town which was the birthplace and residence of the hero and principal character, John Trott. There he lived with his widowed mother, who also shared her house with a friend, Miss Jane Holder, and the latter's orphan niece, Dora, a nine-year-old child, who acted as maid-of-all-work and general drudge. Both John's mother and her friend, Miss Holder, were notoriously disreputable women, but John, though nearly 20, was not aware of the fact, and paid little or no attention to their behavior even when they came home drunk, being completely absorbed in his work—he was an expert mason—and in the calculations and estimates he made for his employer and good friend, Sam Cavanaugh. It never even occurred to him to wonder why it was that "he had no acquaintances among the women of the town, and few among the men," while the women who came from other cities to see his mother and Jane Holder were not of a type which appealed to his very idealistic temperament. Though he did sometimes find the squalor and general disorder of his home vaguely uncomfortable, he was fairly contented until it so chanced that Cavanaugh took him to Tennessee, there to work with him on a new county court house.

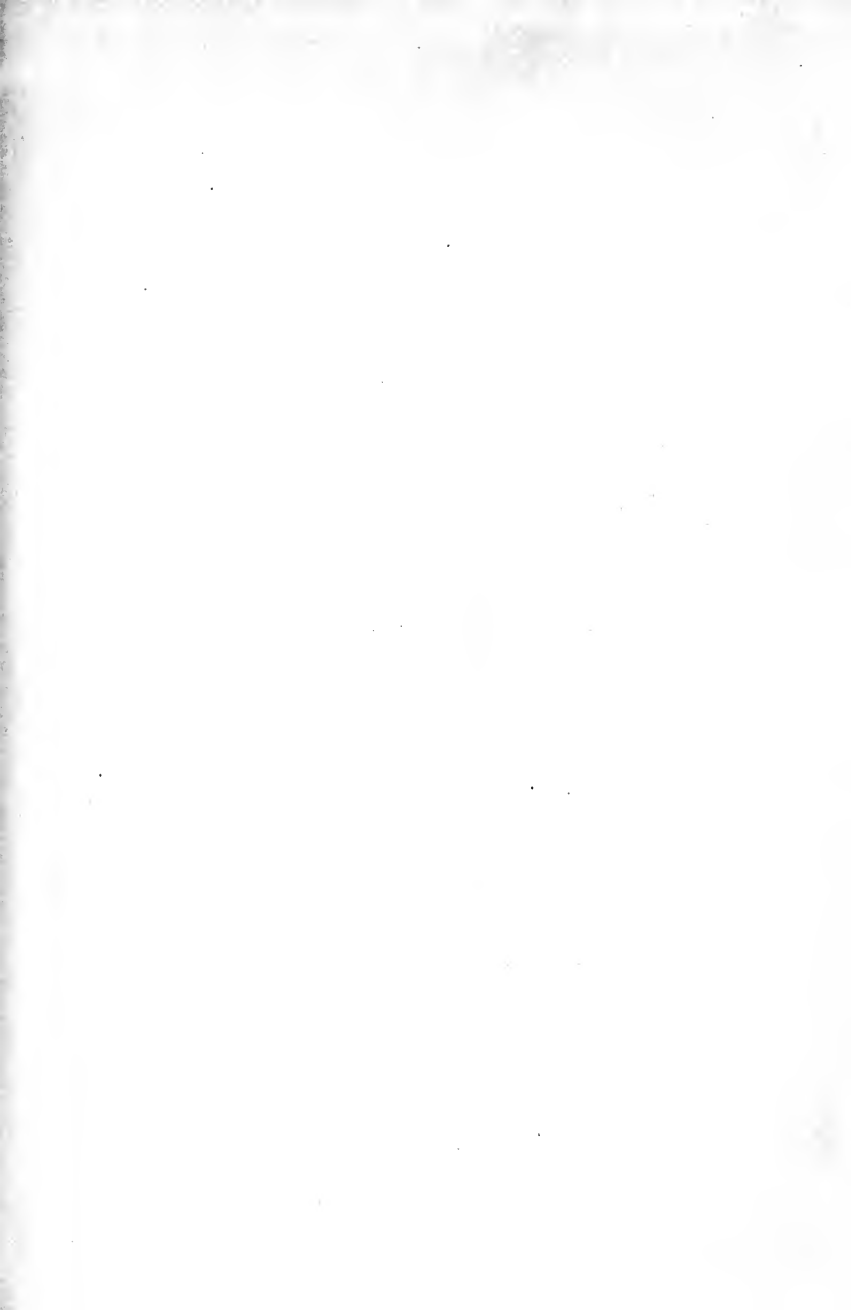
They boarded with a farmer, Richard John are prettily written, as is the description of their coming to the little "Cottage of Delight," they were destined to inhabit for so short a time.

BOOKS BY
WILL N. HARBEN

THE INNER LAW
THE NEW CLARION
THE DESIRED WOMAN
PAUL RUNDEL
WESTERFELT
ABNER DANIEL
DIXIE HART
THE SUBSTITUTE

THE GEORGIANS
POLE BAKER
ANN BOYD
MAM' LINDA
GILBERT NEAL
THE REDEMPTION OF
KENNETH GALT
JANE DAWSON

HARPER & BROTHERS, NEW YORK





[See page 67

"LET LOOSE, OR I'LL KISS YOU!"

THE INNER LAW

A Novel

BY
WILL N. HARBEN

AUTHOR OF
"ABNER DANIEL" "ANN BOYD"
"THE NEW CLARION" ETC.



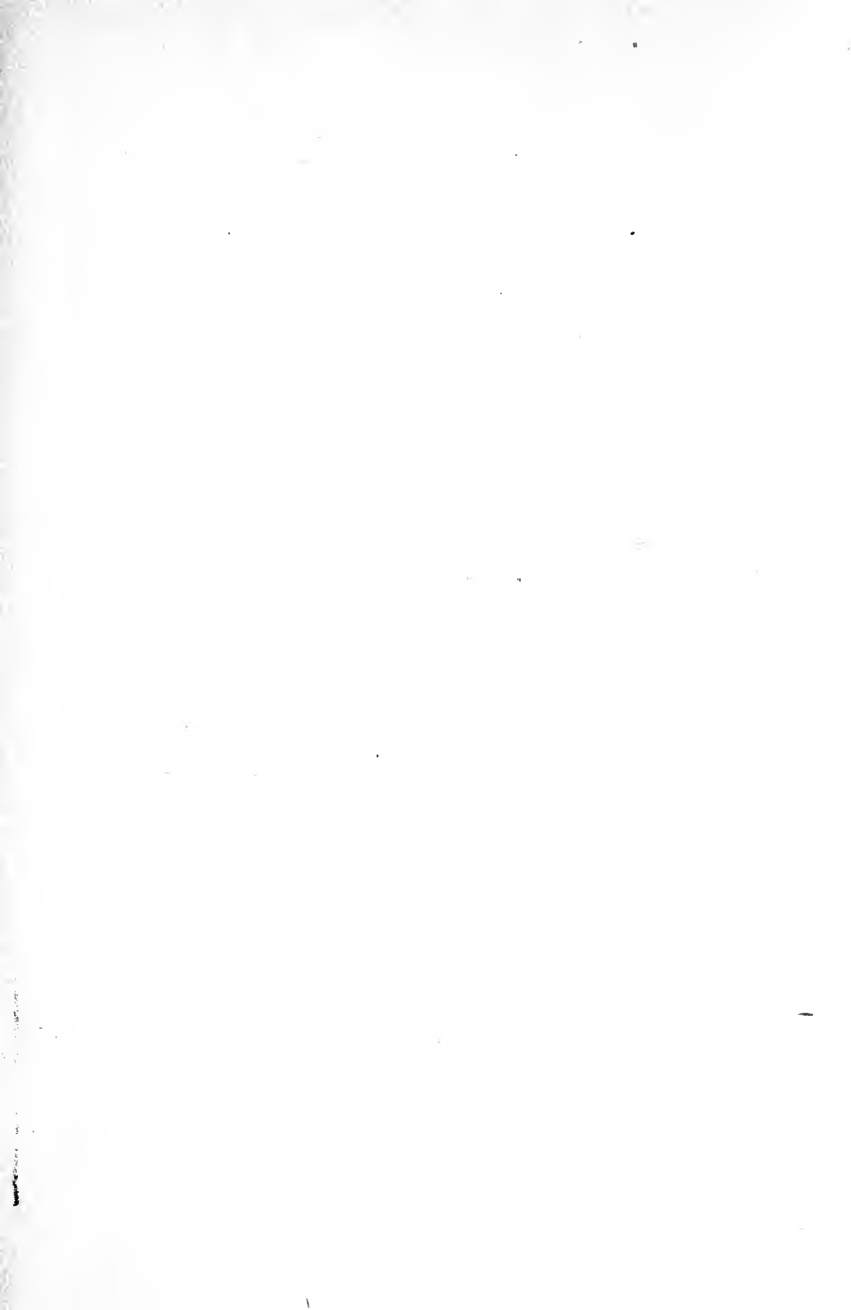
HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK AND LONDON

THE INNER LAW

Copyright, 1915, by Harper & Brothers
Printed in the United States of America
Published September, 1915

L-P

PART I



THE INNER LAW

CHAPTER I

THE lawn of the old residence sloped down on its two sides to boundary fences, and in front to the broad avenue along which the electric cars sped with clanging bells, and various other vehicles of pleasure or traffic moved to and fro on tires of rubber or metal. The homestead was almost in the business section of Atlanta, the more modern houses having been built farther out on new streets and boulevards. Indeed, the owner, old Gilbert Crofton, was possessed of no finer sentiment than the retention as a home of the house his father had built many years before the Civil War and in which he had spent his boyhood. A considerable sum had been offered for the property by enterprising builders of fashionable hotels, but although Gilbert's two sons and daughter had often advised him to sell the place and build a house elsewhere, he had always stoutly refused.

Old Gilbert was in no need of the money that the property would bring. He was rich, owning lands, improved and unimproved, and stocks and bonds in which he dealt constantly. He was the president of several banks in the smaller cities of the State. He was a money-lender and speculator; he advanced cash to planters, taking their crops as security. He encouraged the building of cotton-factories in various towns, that he might

THE INNER LAW

get in on "the ground floor," and that his banks might handle the funds.

For his eldest son, Henry, he had lost all respect and affection. Henry, while only thirty years of age, was the most conspicuous ne'er-do-well in Atlanta. He was a gambler, a *roué*, and a notoriously bad lot in general who was admitted to the best social circles only in deference to his young sister Milicent, a quiet, unobtrusive girl, and to the fact that the Croftons belonged to a very old family of worth and distinction.

For his younger son, Carter, Gilbert had an incongruous sort of affection and was quite proud of him. Carter had just been graduated with high honors at Harvard. He had been a good student, had spent very little money compared to Henry's constant demands, and some of his poems and essays had been published in the Atlanta papers, eliciting high praise from certain scholars, clergymen, and teachers whose judgment old Gilbert respected as understanding their line as well as he understood his. As to Milicent, the old man was seemingly indifferent. Since her mother's death three years ago she had managed the affairs of the house well enough, but was that any more than should be expected of a young woman who had been properly trained by a mother of taste and refinement?

To-day, the fifteenth of May, Milicent, aided by Larkin, a colored man-servant, was arranging tables and seats in the garden behind the house. She was giving a party to the children of certain friends of hers in the city, and about three o'clock the little boys and girls began to arrive. Some came in carriages, under the care of servants, and others, from the immediate neighborhood, came afoot. All were beautifully dressed in spotless white, and showed by their deportment that they were well brought up.

Milicent, a tall, slender blonde, who was neither pretty nor plain, was radiantly cordial as she met them at the

THE INNER LAW

top of the veranda steps, kissed them, and bade them make free with the whole house and grounds. She led them in their games on the grass. She played the piano, conducted their singing of familiar plantation melodies, and directed their dancing in the old-fashioned drawing-room.

Meanwhile her brother Carter had descended from his room, where he had been writing and reading all day, and had thrown himself into a swinging seat at the end of the veranda. He lighted a cigar—it was generally a pipe—and as he smoked he pushed himself back and forth, frowning good-naturedly as the boys and girls romped noisily through the hall and down the steps. He was twenty-one years of age, six feet in height, built well enough to have been an athlete rather than a poet; he had light-brown hair, which he wore slightly longer than the conventional style, and fine blue eyes, behind the thick lashes of which the dream shadows of youth seemed to lie when his poetic moods were on him.

Once, while the children were in the garden behind the house, Milicent approached him with a smile.

"Come play with them!" she urged. "They would feel so complimented to have you join them. Really, they stand a little in awe of you."

"Not to-day, thank you," he laughed. "I'm about as close to the ruffians now as I care to be. Listen to that war-whoop! My! haven't they lungs? What time will they go away?"

"I'll feed them very soon," she smiled. "Come back and have some of the ice-cream. It is very good; so is the punch. Come help us pass it around."

"No, I'll leave that to you and the servants," he said. "This is good enough for me. It is hot back there in the sun."

She was turning away, but paused to ask, "Was Uncle Tom up-stairs when you came down?"

THE INNER LAW

"Yes; I think the children waked him from his nap. I heard him sighing. He has already had enough of the city, I am sure. Atlanta is no place for a man of his temperament who has always lived in the country. He is like a fish out of water. Say, sis, I like to talk to him. He has read a great deal, and is a philosopher of no small attainments. He has already given me a helpful idea."

"What was it?" Milicent caught the chain of the swing, steadied it, and leaned forward.

"Why, he says the constant social whirl here will kill all my best impulses. He thinks I'd write twice as well if I'd cut it all out and settle down in the bosom of nature. The idea has set me thinking. After all, most of the best Old World literature was produced in the country. He wants me to visit him on his farm and try it, anyway. I am going. I'd be company for him and I might like it. Really, there are too many silly things one has to do here and places to go to."

"I know it upsets you," Milicent admitted, "and at this time of the year it is beautiful out there in the mountains. Besides, Uncle Tom really believes you are going to succeed."

"What makes you think that?" Carter asked, eagerly, a flush of pleasure rising in his face.

"Because he talks so much about what you've already done. Yesterday he borrowed your scrap-book and read it constantly all the afternoon. He had tears in his eyes when he spoke of some of the poems which touched him particularly. In fact, he actually startled me."

"Startled you?"

"Yes, by his extraordinary interest, and some of the remarks he dropped. He seemed to be restraining his emotions by the greatest effort. Once or twice he made me feel as if he were going to confide something to me of a very delicate nature. I wonder if living alone so long may not have affected his mind. He has never been the

THE INNER LAW

same since Cousin Tom and Aunt Hattie died. He never speaks of them, and that is odd, for there never was a more devoted husband and father. You know he fairly worshiped Cousin Tom. While the poor boy was alive he was his constant companion."

"Their deaths so close together must have shocked him frightfully," Carter said. "To my mind, he was quite a different man before it happened. He used to smile and jest once in a while when Tom and I were together, but he never does now. There is some mystery about him, and it may come out before long."

CHAPTER II

AN hour later the games on the lawn had ceased. The sun was down and the children had departed. Through the dusty dusk old Crofton drove up to the side of the house in an antiquated one-horse phaeton and alighted. He was tall and lank, partly bald, smooth-shaven, and careless as to his dress. He wore a loose shirt and collar, a narrow black necktie, a short black alpaca coat, a faded vest of flowered silk, baggy gray trousers, and a fuzzy top-hat which needed reshaping and pressing. The pockets of his coat bulged out with note-books, pencils, and legal documents. On his shirt-front were spots of stain and flakes of ashes, for he smoked as well as chewed tobacco.

As he ascended the veranda steps his brother, a man of quite the same general build and features as himself, came slowly down the stairs.

"Thought you were coming to my office," Gilbert remarked, carelessly. "I sat waiting for you for fully an hour. Some of your old college friends came in to see you—Jim Andes and Fred Meek—but they were busy with a land deal up the State and had to leave."

"I'm sorry I did not see them," Thomas Crofton returned. "I started down and got as far as the corner, but the asphalt was as hot as an oven. I could see it bend like dough under the wagon-wheels. It was being sprinkled and a cloud of steam rose from it."

Gilbert grunted contemptuously. "There you go again! If I were like you I'd live in a cave, go stark naked, and be done with it. You are becoming more

THE INNER LAW

and more unnatural, and will end by being a regular hermit there in the mountains. Other men have lost their kin and not made so much fuss about it as you do. You ought to mix and mingle with people and business. Activity, and plenty of it, is what you need."

"I can't help being as I am," Thomas sighed. "You and I were never alike, you know. The terrible turmoil you live in would kill me. It's killing *you*, but you don't know it."

Gilbert sniffed, but as he and his brother walked out on the veranda he grew suddenly silent. Presently Gilbert faced his brother and stared at him steadily, a shifting look of concern in his eyes.

"What did you mean by that last remark?" he asked.

Thomas shrugged his shoulders. "If I tell you it will be for your good, and for no other reason," he said, earnestly. "I've been here only three days, and every night I've seen you walking about at all hours, sometimes in your room, then in the library, then out here on the grass—chewing and smoking, moving about as restlessly as a tiger in a cage. Then at times you have a queer look in your eyes, as if—as if—"

"I've had big things to think out," Gilbert broke in with a touch of rising irritation. "When big deals hang fire or some fool upsets my plans I can't sleep. So much depends on me, you see. I take a notion to put a thing through, and I can't rest till it is done and I see the results in hard cash or substantial, interest-drawing investments."

"Well, you are killing yourself, that's all," Thomas said. "Keep it up and you won't be alive five years from to-day."

Gilbert sat on the balustrade and folded his arms. "Humph!" he ejaculated. "That's *your* opinion, eh?"

"You may sniff and sneer," the other said, "but I am giving you the best advice you ever had. My quiet life in the mountains has given me the opportunity to read and think on lines often overlooked by more active

THE INNER LAW

persons. The foundation of your fortune and the little I have to-day was made by our father. You resemble him in many ways."

"I've been told that before," Gilbert said. "He was the keenest trader of his day. If he had lived longer and the war hadn't taken his negroes he'd have left us a bigger chunk of money than he did."

"Yes, if he had *lived longer*, but he didn't live. He burnt the candle at both ends. He died at about your age. Did you ever think of that? He died of softening of the brain. The disease itself is not hereditary, but the mental habits which produce it are. I do not want to make you mad, but I *do* want to warn you. The other day you told me an odd thing. It worried me, and it ought to worry you."

"What was that?" Gilbert took the quid of tobacco from his mouth, threw it on the grass, and fumbled in his pocket for a cigar. He avoided his brother's kindly gaze. His hands quivered; his broad lip twitched.

"Why, you told me that a stranger introduced himself to you recently, and when you tried to tell him your own name you could not do so. *You could not remember it.*"

"Yes, that was true, but I was worried at the time over business. He asked me rather sudden-like. Bosh! You can't scare me."

"I remember that that was one of the first symptoms of our father's breakdown," Thomas Crofton went on. "He came in one day and admitted to us all that his memory was gone. He couldn't recall things which had happened only the day before. He was frightened. Unlike you, he saw the seriousness of his condition. He went to doctors, you know, and they all advised a less strenuous life. He tried to follow their directions, but it was too late."

Gilbert struck a match and lighted his cigar. "Oh, I

THE INNER LAW

remember all that," he said, stubbornly. "You can't frighten me. You and I are different sorts of men. I'm all right. I'll live as long as you do—mark my words. Huh! I'm laying plans for things now that won't get ripe for twenty years."

"You really don't know how serious your condition is," Thomas went on, gravely. "The night before last you left your bed about three o'clock. You walked unsteadily, knocking against tables and chairs. I heard you go down the stairs and into the library. I looked down the steps, and as there was no light below I wondered what was wrong. I heard you in the hall, fumbling with the lock of the front door. Then you crossed the veranda and stumbled down the steps. I went to the window of my room and looked out. I saw you restlessly pacing back and forth on the walk. I went back to bed and tried to sleep, but I still heard your step on the gravel and failed. You were there fully two hours. I looked out several times and you were always smoking. It was five o'clock by my watch when you came back to your room."

Gilbert laughed contemptuously. "You think you've made a big discovery, don't you? That's because you've not seen much of me for the last twenty-five years. I've been doing that sort of thing for a long time now. It is the way I work out some of my best schemes. To tell the truth, I was awfully worried that night. I had just made a big investment in Charley Farnham's new railroad. I was acting on my best judgment when I went into it, and I ought to have let that first impression suffice, but a spiteful fellow that envies Charley's big success set in to poison my mind. He told me all sorts of things about Charley's fast life and extravagant habits, and hinted that I was the chief financial cat's-paw of the scheme and the laughing-stock of the whole town. He said Charley would go to pieces in a month or so, and that the cash I'd ad-

THE INNER LAW

vanced would be lost. I ought to have had more sense than to let a meddling fool like that upset me, but I could not sleep that night. The more I thought about it the more I was convinced that I had been taken in. You see, it hurt my business pride to think that I'd been hoodwinked by a man as young as Farnham is. The reason I happened to favor the railroad in the first place was that Farnham and Carter are such close friends. I said to myself that the investment was to be a fine, substantial nest-egg for Carter, one that will eventually make him rich. Carter is my favorite among my children. I don't deny it. The other two rub me the wrong way, but somehow he never does. He has a fine nature and everybody knows it. He'll never be a practical man, but I don't care. We've had writers and teachers in our stock away back. In fact, we all thought you'd be a poet yourself. I know mother was disappointed when you married and settled down on a farm and quit writing. Yes, they all say Carter will make his mark, and I want to help him all I can. To write well, they tell me, a man ought to have his mind free from worry over business matters, and the railroad interest struck me as being the most substantial thing for the boy. But the worry I had that night did me good. I set inquiries afloat the next day and fully investigated Farnham's record. He *does* spend money like water. He gives swell dinners and acts as lavishly as a royal prince, but it is because such things bring him into contact with men of big capital. No one has ever seen him drunk. He has never played a game of cards in his life nor gambled in risky stocks or futures. There is no secret about his habits with certain fast women. He comes from the same sort of hot blood that you and I came from, and is not a whit worse. The Lord knows we have no right to criticize him on *that* score."

Thomas Crofton shuddered. An expression of deep

THE INNER LAW

pain clutched his thin features. "You always manage to lug that in," he said, coldly.

"And you always manage to keep it out," Gilbert laughed, coarsely. "I'll be hanged if I don't believe you are becoming a saint out there in your mountains. I haven't much use for a man that condemns the young for doing things he is too old to enjoy himself."

Thomas turned upon his brother almost fiercely, "If a man learns by experience that lust of the flesh is actual damnation to the soul, and does not advise the young against it he is a weakling and a coward."

"Puff!" sniffed Gilbert, and he laughed softly. "You may have learned that it is damnation, but what is that to the rest of the world? Well, you may preach your doctrine where you want to, but don't mention it to a Crofton. So far Carter is as innocent as a girl, but I am watching him. One of these days he will blaze out and come to me for help out of his scrapes as Henry has done often enough."

"For God's sake don't entertain the thought," Thomas cried. "I believe he will be different. His soul is more awake than—than ours were—than Henry's was. He is your son and not mine, but I sometimes put him in my poor dead boy's place, and I am praying to God to keep him pure. Why should we all be accursed? There are pure, clean men in the world. Why should there not be one at least in our family?"

"They are as God made them, if there *is* a God," Gilbert smiled. "If there is a God He put certain impulses of procreation into men, and men such as you've become lately say that it is the work of hell and the devil. But you and your sort are in the minority. All men of experience and observation know that your views are poppycock pure and simple. There comes Henry now. The Lord only knows what he's been up to to-day. He's a sly rascal—one of the old style that saws wood and says

THE INNER LAW

nothing. One day I heard that he— Never mind, I can't tell you now; he doesn't know I'm on to him. Some married man with sand in his gizzard and a pair of eyes in his head will shoot him down in his tracks one of these days."

The gate was open, and Henry Crofton strolled up the walk. He was short in stature, inclined to thinness of frame, had light-blue eyes, brown hair, a rather large head which was becoming bald on top. He was stylishly and even foppishly attired, and a faint perfume came from the handkerchief with which he was wiping his brow. His lips and mouth were rather sensuous in appearance. His slender, all but attenuated fingers had long, well-cared-for nails, their tips stained with nicotine from cigarettes; his brown mustache was curved and twisted after the most approved fashion. The pin in the full, rich necktie was a fine pearl surrounded by diamonds. He carried a light cane with which he gracefully saluted the two men as he drew near them.

"Hot enough for you, unc'?" he asked, with an easy smile.

"Yes, indeed," Thomas replied, a far-away look in his eyes. "I'm not used to it, you know."

"I'm just back from Asheville," Henry went on in his rather shrill voice. "It is fine and cool up there—slept under blankets every night."

"You ought to come out my way," his uncle said, softly. "It is delightful there even in the warmest weather."

"I've been thinking I would," Henry returned with a smile, "but something always prevents. This town is not what it was in your day. It is a gay place socially, and our leading business men are as active as plungers in Wall Street. I wish you would talk to father. I don't profess to know his business, but he is working too hard. All his associates say so to me, at least, and I've seen him at his desk when he was on the verge of collapsing. I

THE INNER LAW

was there once lately when he was unable to sign his name, and—you remember it, father—the matter had to stand over till the next day.”

Gilbert frowned and averted his face. He said nothing.

Henry looked at him regretfully a moment, then said: “Forgive me, father. I’m afraid I’ve offended you again, but I didn’t mean to meddle. It is only natural for me to worry. I can’t give advice. I’m a dead failure at everything. Even Carter, as young as he is, has a future before him that will be worth while. I know I’m proud of him. Well, I’ll go up and wash the dust off my hands, and will see you at supper. There is the bell; I must make haste.”

CHAPTER III

THE whole family answered the bell's summons. Milicent sat in her mother's chair at the head of the table, her two brothers on her right, her uncle on the left. Her father sat at the opposite end. A yellow maid, in white cap and apron, brought in the dishes from the kitchen adjoining the dining-room through a doorway, the shutter of which swung noiselessly. There were cold ham, hot biscuits, fried chicken, eggs, home-made preserves, coffee, and tea. The meal passed almost in silence. Thomas Crofton, as he ate and drank, wondered how it could be that his niece and nephews were so unobservant of the great change that had come over their father within the two years since Thomas had paid his last visit to them. Was it possible that they failed to note the deep lines about the too-loose mouth, the quivering fingers, the restless eyes beneath the lowering brows which shot questioning and yet cautious glances, now behind him, now on either side, or over the heads of his children to the curtained windows? How was it that they failed to see Gilbert now and then drop his knife and fork, clutch his food with his fingers, and shove it clumsily into his mouth as from animal instinct alone?

When they all rose from the table Thomas Crofton went out on the veranda; thence he descended to the lawn and strolled across the grass to a summer-house, where he sat staring blankly before him. He was thinking of Henry's character and the horrible indifference of his father to it.

THE INNER LAW

"My God! the curse is on us all!" he cried, almost aloud. "My father had it in his veins. Lust, lust was in his blood and loins. Gilbert is checked only by his failing health and craze for wealth. Henry is going down if ever a man was, and I myself stand before God still unpardoned, and I may never be."

There was a step on the grass in the direction of the house. Some one was coming. It was Carter. He paused and leaned in the vine-hung doorway.

"I saw you come this way," he began, half timidly. "I've been waiting for a chance to see you alone. Milly happened to say—she is so anxious to encourage me, you know—she happened to say, uncle, that you had the kindness to look over my scrap-book. I was not sure that you had ever run across any publication of mine. To tell the truth, I've dreaded your verdict, for I know the fine taste you have in such matters. The things you, yourself, wrote when you were young always appealed to me."

"Oh, don't mention anything of mine!" Thomas said, quickly. "All that belongs to the past. I didn't keep it up, you know. I let other matters distract my attention. I dawdled my time away till it was too late."

"What you wrote was written at about my age, I believe," Carter remarked, tentatively.

"Yes, just after leaving college." Thomas motioned to the seat beside him, and his nephew sat down. Neither could see the face of the other distinctly, for it was quite dark, the only light being that of the electric lamp suspended across the street. An audible sigh escaped the older man. He raised his hand and stroked his beard.

"Even now," Carter began, "it seems to me with your ripe experiences in life, and that ideal retreat of yours in the mountains, that you ought to be able to—"

"It's too late—it's too late!" broke in the other. "You are too young to understand what I mean, my boy. I'm

THE INNER LAW

afraid I could not make it clear without going into matters which I'd rather forget. When we fail to take the right course in life the time comes when the remainder of life seems too short—too unimportant to be worth improving. Living poetry, it seems to me, must bubble up from implicit faith in the—the ultimate meaning of life and the boundless content that accompanies such a faith."

"I wish I had your beautiful philosophy," Carter said. "I've thought hundreds of times of what you said to me at poor Tom's funeral. No one else had ever been so outspoken, and I think it did me good."

"What I said that day came from abject despair," Thomas said, huskily. "My whole hope had been in my boy, and there he lay in his coffin. He loved you, Carter, and for his sake I've loved you ever since his death. I want you to be happy and successful, though I am almost past desire in most things. I would give my life now if by so doing I could teach you to avoid certain things which lead the young away from correct living. Some of us here in the South are terribly wrong in a certain attitude to life. My father was blind to the moral dangers which lay before me, and your father—blind or indifferent, one or the other—and your father, I fancy, has never spoken plainly to you or Henry or warned you."

"No, he has not," Carter replied, somewhat abashed. "I know what you mean, and I appreciate your mentioning it."

"If I could only feel sure that you *do* fully understand I would rest satisfied," Thomas pursued, earnestly; "but you may not—you really may not, and above all things I want you to understand. To be plainer, Carter, there seems to be a hereditary trait in the blood of the Croftons that few of the men have escaped. Those of coarser fiber—Henry and your father—have not suffered much in consequence of it, and they may not, but it would be different with you. I know what I am talking about. It

THE INNER LAW

would crush out your beautiful ideality, kill your poetic inspiration, and in the end you'd loathe yourself. The mystic sense of God and His laws must inspire all true poetry, and that wondrous sense of the transcendental does not accompany lust of the flesh and its horrible consequences."

For a moment neither of the two spoke. Milicent was playing on the piano. The sweet old song she began to sing came through the open windows of the drawing-room. Presently Carter broke the silence. His voice was low and full of sympathy.

"I want you to know, uncle, that I fully understand what you mean. Father has kept back nothing from me as to his early life; I know it all. In fact, I know the type of man my grandfather was. I couldn't avoid that. Even Milly knows, for among the old papers in the house is his will, in which he makes bequests to certain illegitimate children of his. That came to me as a shock, for in a way I revered him."

"I see you *do* understand, and I am satisfied."

"Yes, and I can promise you that—"

"Don't!" exclaimed the other. "Make no promises to me or to any one. I once made a promise to God—I'm speaking plainly, my boy—I made a promise to God on my bended knees, and broke it. Some day I may unroll my life to you. I will, if it will prevent you from doing what I've done. I've searched all literature in vain for a record of any human agony as refined and intricate as mine has been, and still is. If God has ever yet laid His hand on man as heavily as He has on me I do not know of it. I want you to come to see me. I won't preach to you any more, but something has given me the hope that I may help you into the road I missed, and that perhaps God may grant me that as a part of my atonement."

"I am coming. I've set my heart upon it," Carter responded, with feeling. "I appreciate more than I can

THE INNER LAW

express, uncle, what you have said and the way you have put it. I feel drawn to you to-night as I've never been drawn even to my father. I know you are suffering, and if I can help you during my stay out there I shall do it. You inspire me as I never was inspired before. I shall come very soon. I am tired of the silly chatter and whirl of people and things here in town."

Milly was beginning another song. Thomas Crofton rose and laid his hand on the shoulder of his nephew, who felt it quivering.

"It has been several years since I've heard music like that," he faltered. "The piano out home has been closed a long time now and there is no one to open it. Let us go in and join your sister. You have—have taken a load off my mind, my son. You are coming soon, you say?"

"Yes, very soon. You may expect me within the week, and I shall stay till you order me away. I am going to work hard and enjoy it fully."

CHAPTER IV

AS the time approached for his visit to his uncle's farm Carter became more and more delighted with the prospect before him. He got together the few books, notes, and manuscripts which he intended to take with him and began to pack his trunk. He smiled as he put in his evening suit. "I'll have no need for it out there," he said. "We'll go to bed with the chickens and rise with the sun."

At this moment Henry came across the hall from his room. He paused in the doorway and looked in. He nodded and smiled.

"Say, Cart', have you got any spare change? I'm going to Rome with some fellows. There is a dance on to-night, a horse-race to-morrow, and I am clean out of cash. I must have a ten-spot. I won't have time to see father; he has gone to the country to attend a land sale."

"Yes, I can spare it," Carter answered, and he gave his brother the money.

"Thanks. So you are off to-morrow?" Henry thrust the bill into his pocket carelessly and turned to leave. "Well, I can't say much for your taste, but I hope you will like it. I spent one day in that old house last summer, and it gave me the shivers for a month afterward. Gloom leaked out of the very walls and stood in black puddles on the floor, but you and uncle have a lot in common, and you may like it. There was only one redeeming feature about the place. There was a girl there. Gee! she was

THE INNER LAW

a gem—the most luscious trick I ever saw. She was the daughter of the old mountain woman who does the house-work. The girl was only about seventeen, and shy and awkward, but she had a shape and complexion ahead of anything in this town. She couldn't read or write, bless you! She told me so in her awful dialect, but her voice was as round and mellow as a mocking-bird's. Well, good-by. I must hurry on. I sha'n't forget this money. I'll lay it aside for you sure."

When he had left Milicent came to the door. "You let him have it; I know you did," she said. "He tried to get it from me, but I flatly refused. I can't let him throw away my savings. He never thinks of repaying; besides, he is living too fast. He spends three times as much as you do. I am absolutely ashamed of him. Everybody knows what he is; he hasn't a particle of pride. I blush and shudder every time I meet him out among my friends. He has such a bold, coarse manner, especially among women."

"Never mind," Carter said, consolingly. "We can't help what he is. Besides, he may come out all right."

"No; it is too late," Milicent declared. "His affairs are the talk of the town. He glories in his awful conduct with disgusting women all over the South. He breaks hearts and tramples them under foot. He will never marry—no self-respecting woman would have him, and the others are too wise. Did you ever think of it? The future of our name is now solely in your care. Uncle's son is gone, and uncle will never marry again. Oh, Carter, I can't tell you how much I depend upon you. You are brilliant. You have brains and lofty ideals. You are going to pull the Crofton name out of the mire and put it where it used to stand in the history of the country. You will marry some nice girl, have children, and lead a normal life."

"Poor sis!" He kissed her brow gently and stroked

THE INNER LAW

back her hair. "You are blue to-day. Uncle Tom's coming has reminded you of his troubles, and you have taken them on yourself."

"Oh, it's everything put together," Milicent sighed. "Haven't you noticed the change in father lately?"

"I noticed that he was rather talkative," Carter replied, "and rather over-affectionate with me, at least. He caught me the other day in the hall and actually hugged me. Tears came into his eyes, and his voice shook so that he could hardly speak. That was strange conduct for him, wasn't it?"

"Yes, he has changed remarkably," Milicent agreed. "He speaks to me about things no man ought to mention to his daughter. The other day he made the coarsest sort of allusion, and laughed as if he thought I ought to appreciate it. That is an indication of approaching insanity. I am afraid he is failing fast. It is a wonder to me that he can attend to business as he is. But you must not worry about him. I want you to have a good, restful time in the mountains. You must send me what you write. Really, your career is all I have to care for now. I love to hear your poems spoken of."

"Well, I'll do my best for your sake," he smiled. "I've been unproductive for several months, and I feel as if I shall get down to hard work out there."

CHAPTER V

AS Carter sat in the railway-car and through the open window watched the dingy suburbs of the city thin out and vanish, and the green fields and meadows unfold before him, he had a sense of vast freedom and poetic elation. He felt that he was putting something sordid and unworthy away and breathing into himself that which was true and permanent. He whistled as he always did when quite contented with himself. He got out his Keats and read several selections which fitted into his mood.

Seated in front of him was an elderly woman and a rather pretty young girl, evidently mother and daughter. He caught the girl's glance, steadied his own upon her, feeling that she was conscious of his warm and respectful admiration. He looked away, only to glance back the next moment and catch her almost tentative look. He held his book so that she might read the author's name on the cover and understand the kind of literature he cared for. He wondered if by any chance she might be familiar with his own productions. A girl like that certainly would be pleased to know that she had actually seen and attracted the admiration of the young Crofton of whom the papers had spoken so highly, and whose words had been set to music in one case at least. But the harmless flirtation was soon to end, for at the first station the porter came to help the two ladies from the car. When they had descended to the ground the poet went to the door and looked out. The negro driver of a carriage had met them and was helping them into the

THE INNER LAW

vehicle. As the train was moving on Carter caught the girl's backward glance; she flushed slightly and he smiled. She all but smiled in return, and he nodded regretfully. A comfortable-looking farm-house half a mile away, with green blinds, a windmill for supplying water, and great oaks in front, was doubtless the destination of the two, and as he resumed his seat he allowed his fancy to dwell on the idyllic life such a residence would afford him with such a companion as the girl he had just seen. But the real girl of his dreams was yet to be met. He certainly would not attempt to describe her, for she would have qualities of mind and points of physical beauty far beyond the ordinary. She might be the petted daughter of some great general, Senator, or Governor, or she might be a poor girl without fortune or name. It would be a delight to furnish every needed thing to the one he loved. She would be neither tall nor short, stout nor slight, but she would be beautiful in thought and person, and aristocratic in bearing. Now he fancied her home as being some ancient mansion in Virginia, and she might be some far-off cousin of his with the refined features he had seen in the portraits of his mother's ancestors. Her fox-hunting brothers in their rough rural clothes would not appreciate his poetic nature fully, and in their presence he would have to suppress his ideals, but *she* would understand. He pictured their marriage in a quaint chapel near the mansion. Milly would be a bridesmaid. The newspapers in reporting the wedding would have much to say about his standing as a poet and the considerable fortune he was to inherit from a wealthy and indulgent father. He had heard men say that a man could never marry his ideal woman, but that was absurd. The wonderful creature destined for his companionship was waiting for him somewhere in flesh as well as in spirit.

Such dreams kept him company during the entire two-hour journey. Indeed, he was conscious of a disagreeable

THE INNER LAW

shock as the shrieking whistle of the locomotive announced its approach to Benton, the village where his uncle's carriage was to meet him. It was as if he were waking from a delightful sleep filled with intangible, far-leading visions. By contrast, the hot car with its dust-covered passengers, some of whom were perspiring farmers without their coats, and bedraggled women with crying infants in their arms, jarred on him. The gleaming steel rails of the switch-yard, in which the train was slowing down, reflected the hot rays of the sun, and the cluster of small cottages and stores of the hamlet wore a lonely, dejected look. Scarcely a man, woman, or child was seen on the unpaved street which led down to the station's platform, and when Carter descended to the ground and went into the little waiting-room his spirits sank lower on the discovery that no one was there to meet him. As the train rolled away he put his bag and book on a bench and sat down. There was a square hole in the partition in front of him, and peering from it was a young man wearing the cap of a telegraph-operator. He nodded and smiled.

"Are you Mr. Crofton?" he asked, affably.

"Yes," Carter returned.

"I thought you might be. I have a message for you. A man from your uncle's place came in just now and said tell you that you'd have to wait here a while. One of Mr. Crofton's horses sprained its ankle, and he had to send for another. Somebody will be along in an hour or so."

"All right. Thank you," Carter replied, with a smile. "I am in no special hurry."

The operator drew his face out of sight, his instrument began to click, and Carter took up his book and tried to read, but to no good effect. Putting the book down, he rose and stood in the doorway and looked out. The stores facing the street on both sides had low board awnings, and in front of one of them stood a hooded wagon laden with coops of chickens and cases of eggs. Down

THE INNER LAW

the winding red-clay road on a hillside came a young farmer astride of a mule. He was driving some cows and calves toward a store with a butcher's sign on it. A little way down the railway track was a stock-pen full of hogs, up to the chute of which a rusty switch-engine, which rocked to and fro, in actual decrepitude, was shifting a car.

"How can people live like this?" the poet asked himself, with a weary sigh. "It would kill me." He strolled to the end of the platform, where there was a well with a bucket and windlass. Having nothing else to do, he lowered the bucket into the well and drew up some water. A tin dipper hung from a nail near by, and he drank some of the water, which was delightfully cool and refreshing.

"Right you are, stranger!" some one called out behind him, and, turning, he saw a spry young man putting down a leather sample-case in the doorway of the waiting-room, from which he was emerging. "Adam's ale is the only drink you can get in this hot hole, and that is the best freestone I know between here and Atlanta. If you don't mind I'll join you."

With a smile Carter filled the dipper and extended it. "Yes, it is good," he agreed; he was pleased to have the companionship of a man even of the type the stranger represented, and yet he did not wholly approve of the fellow's crude familiarity.

"Waiting for the train, eh?" the drummer gulped as he drank copiously. "The operator says she's on time, for a wonder. Traveling-man?"

Carter shook his head coldly. It struck him that the question was obviously absurd. He flattered himself that there was nothing about his appearance that would justify such a supposition. Surely any one could see that his clothing was not cut by the kind of tailor who supplied commercial men with their rather flashy apparel? His shoes were different in style; his cravat was rich and full, carefully tied, and not one of the kind the drummer

THE INNER LAW

wore. The man wore cuffs with glaring links which were separable from the sleeves, a veritable abomination in Carter's eyes, who regarded such contrivances as confessions of both stinginess and uncleanness on the part of the wearer. The voluble young man had refilled the dipper, and now proffered it with a broad, friendly grin.

"Take one with me," he said.

"Thank you. No more," Carter returned, frigidly, for he was determined now to show the stranger that his familiarity was unwarranted.

"We can slide into the smoking-car when that dang train gets here." The drummer had taken out two cigars and held them forward. "Have one; they don't really cost me anything—such things go into my expense account under the head of extras—necessary treats to promising customers and the like."

"Thank you. I don't care to smoke now," Carter said; and he coldly explained that he was not to take the train in question.

To his surprise the drummer smiled frankly, chuckled aloud, and said: "There is no use beating the devil around a bush, Mr. Crofton. I knew you were not a drummer. A drummer that didn't have sense enough not to know that you are not one would lose his job the first day out. I just spoke as I did to sort o' set the ball rolling, as the fellow said. To tell the truth, the operator in there told me your name, and said you were a nephew of Tom Crofton. I was wondering if you are a son of old Gilbert, of Atlanta?"

"I am," Carter replied, simply.

"By George! you don't mean it? Then you may be a brother to the one that writes the fine poems I've read in the papers. Gee! you may be the man *himself*!"

Carter was unaware of the fact, but he flushed with pleasure. "I do write now and then," he said. "I suppose I am the one to whom you refer."

THE INNER LAW

The drummer drew back, thrust his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat, and stared. "'To whom.' Now, I know you are. Nobody says that but a writer or a teacher these days. Stand still, by gum! Stand still and let me take a good look at you. There, that's all right. Now shake! Honor me with your hand, sir. Harris is my name—plain Jim Harris, head traveling-man for Trigg Brothers & White, of Baltimore—sugar, coffee, and tea, with a side line of paper, bags, and twine. Glad to meet you, sir. I don't know when I've had a greater pleasure."

With a pleased laugh Carter submitted his soft, slender hand to the hard, broad one. His flush had increased; he was tingling with delight which he made no effort to conceal.

"You flatter me," he said. "I am only a beginner, and it is pleasant to have a stranger say he has read my productions."

"I couldn't flatter you, sir. I take off my hat to your gift wherever I meet it. All my life, since I was a little boy, I've thought that to be able to write beautiful things to be read the world over, after you are dead and gone, was the greatest gift the Almighty could grant a human being. I will say now that the delight this meeting gives me is partly selfish. Let me explain, sir. I am engaged to a fine, well-born country girl in the upper part of the State, and it was through her that I first came in contact with your work. You may know how young couples will do when they are corresponding with each other? Well, she has often cut out your love-poems from the newspapers and inclosed them in her letters as having some sort of application to our case. You remember the one about the young poet meeting the unhappy married woman out in the moonlight? Gee! that was fine—the most original idea I ever saw in print. I didn't send that to Mary, and I don't know that she ever run across it. Of

THE INNER LAW

course, you know that it would not be exactly the sort of thing for a fellow to send to his best girl, for you'll admit, I reckon, that it had a sort of—I don't know—a sort of double meaning."

"Well, it wasn't exactly intended for the very *young*," Carter returned, wisely. "But I think the situation was a true one."

"No doubt, no doubt," the drummer nodded as he smoked. "But how a human being could imagine such a thing, get it up out of air, as the fellow said, is a mystery to me. You poets must live two lives—one of the flesh and blood, and the other of what you might call the fancy. If there is no harm in asking a question right here, I'd love to do it."

"Go ahead," Carter answered. "You seem to be a close observer."

"I don't know that I am, but the imagination has always been a great puzzle to me. I reckon because I never had it. What I want to know, and you needn't answer unless you want to, is this: when a poet is writing a poem like that one of yours, does he, or rather *is* he for the time being in the shoes of his hero? Oh, I'm getting this all balled up! Say, I mean this, did you while you were writing the description of that chap's short love for that lonely, passionate woman—did you, in your own heart, actually love the woman you were writing about?"

Carter smiled with delight over the man's naïve question. "I really may have," he admitted. "I think the imagination does sometimes temporarily take on even that much reality. Yes, I think that I could not have done the work to suit me if I had not been able to feel at the moment as I thought the man of the poem felt."

The drummer looked down and slowly shook his head. "An opinion of mine isn't worth a hill of beans to a man like you," he said, seriously; "but for my part, I'd be afraid of that sort o' thing. I really would."

THE INNER LAW

"You think you would be?" Carter was smiling over the sheer simplicity of the man's point of view.

"Yes, I'd hate to handle it," he said, still gravely. "I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. It seems to me to be as dangerous to the health of the natural mind as morphine is to the average body. Let a man fancy that he is in love constantly, first with this girl and then with that one, in his imagination or out, and it won't be long till he won't be able to love anybody deep, and, take it from me, that must be awful. I've seen a lot of life since I went on the road, and I've run against things that have switched other men off the right track in a hurry. I'm old-fashioned. I came from old-fashioned Methodist folks on both sides, and I want to settle down in an old-fashioned way—marry the right sort of a woman and try to bring up the right sort o' children. That's me. When I say I've seen good men go crooked on the road I mean it. I've seen fellows who had lovely wives at home get to making dates with gay women in this town or that, and it wouldn't be twelve months before home would be the last place they'd want to go back to. But you couldn't head off one of those smart Alecs to save your neck from the halter. They see no harm in it as a pastime, and never let up till it's too late. They usually end by blaming their wives with it, and get a divorce or force their wives to do it. So I'll tell you, Mr. Crofton, that I don't let my mind dwell long on any woman except my girl. When my day's work is over I set in the office of some hotel or in my room, and write her a letter. Sometimes the young folks are dancing in the parlor, and other drummers are palming themselves off as unmarried men and having the time of their life; but I cut it out. I'm a great hand at believing that my girl has every bit as much right to carry on with fellows behind my back as I have to flirt with girls on the road."

"You are right, of course," Carter answered.

THE INNER LAW

"I wish you could meet Mary, I really do," Harris ran on. "Gee! won't she be astonished when I write her that I've actually met Carter Crofton? Say, I hear my train coming. I don't know how you will look at it, but I want to ask a favor. I don't know if you make a habit of doing the like or not, and if you don't it is all right. Would you mind scribbling your name down in my order-book? If you will I'll tear the leaf out and send it to her. By gum! she'd frame it, hang it up in the parlor, and show it to all the neighbors."

"I will do it with pleasure," Carter agreed; and he took the book and pencil and complied, finishing the signature with the boyish flourish he liked to use.

"Thank you, very, very much, sir," Harris said. "I'll watch your career from now on with double interest, and so will Mary. When the grand event comes off I'll send you a card—I will sure. Good-by."

"Good-by." They shook hands, and as the cars slowed up at the platform the drummer hurried away to get his sample-case. As the train rolled off Carter saw him leaning from a window, waving his handkerchief. And although it seemed to him to be a little beneath his proper dignity on such a short acquaintance, Carter waved his own handkerchief in response. Surely the man was a diamond in the rough.

The very air seemed full of ecstasy. As he walked to and fro on the deserted platform our poet was wafted along by the very "breath of the gods." How glorious it was to be able to sense the exquisite things which were too fine, too elusive for ordinary minds, and to have the genius to record them in lasting form! God had been kind to him indeed. The choicest gifts of the universe were falling around him like the leaves and petals of flowers. He had youth, health, wealth, good birth, and now fame—glorious, deathless fame—was coming.

CHAPTER VI

AN hour later a horse and buggy in charge of a lank negro man of middle age drove up. Carter recognized the man as a farm-laborer on his uncle's place—an ex-slave of the Crofton family—whom he had seen a few years before.

"Marse Tom say fetch you on in de buggy, young marster," he announced, as he stood servilely scraping his broad, ill-shod feet backward, and holding his slouch-hat in his hand. "He say he couldn't send de ca'ge widout another hoss."

"All right," Carter answered. "What about my trunk?" indicating it on the platform near by.

"De farm-wagon comin' fer it," said Hank. "It 'll be on from de grist-mill in er few minutes wid er load er co'n meal fer we-all's hands."

The ten-mile drive along the side of the foot-hills of the mountains which rose blue and hazy in the distance was cool, shaded by the boughs of overhanging trees, and delightful in many ways. As the road took them into a higher altitude the air became more crisp and bracing. Many wild flowers were seen, and as Carter breathed in their fragrance he was filled to overflowing with inspiration. The transcendental peace and quiet of the spot clutched and charmed his fancy as nothing had ever done before. Surely it was a divine fatality which had brought this welcome change into his life just when he needed it. As he feasted on the bluish distance he seemed to possess the mystic power of seeing beyond the material limits of

THE INNER LAW

matter into the invisible, indescribable, unnamable something which had long haunted his boyish dreams. He smiled to himself as he wondered how he had borne the conventional routine he was leaving. In Atlanta he had been a slave to the habits and whims of a lower order of mentality, but now he was to be himself and allow his richest impulses full play out in nature, as the greatest of poets and artists had done.

They drove through a delightful shaded dale, and came out on a spot where two roads crossed and a little wooden school-house with green blinds stood in a grove of trees. A hundred or more boys and girls, who evidently had been playing games, now stood still, all eying with curiosity the approaching buggy.

"They are at recess, I suppose," Carter remarked to Hank.

"No, suh," was the smiling answer, "recess done over. De teacher let um stay out 'ca'se I tol' 'im, so I did, dat I was gwine fetch you by dis mawnin'."

"Oh, it can hardly be that!" Carter said, gratified, and yet, it may be stated, not actually surprised.

A slender young man in a long clerical-looking black coat was seen leaving the group and hastening toward the buggy. He was bareheaded, and held a book in his hand. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Crofton," he began, rather stiffly, as he bowed. "I hope you won't think I am officious, but I want to introduce myself and bid you welcome to our county, sir, in my humble capacity as teacher here. I am Marvin Lewis, sir. I know your uncle pretty well, and he and I have often talked over your rare talent and laudable ambition. He is very proud of you; in fact, we *all* here in the South are justly so. We sorely need more Laniers, Poes, and Haynes."

Uncle Hank had stopped the horse, and Carter took the hand extended over the front wheel of the buggy.

"I am glad indeed to meet you, Mr. Lewis," he said. "It is very kind of you to come out."

THE INNER LAW

The teacher smiled, touched his thin, beardless lips with his closed book. "You notice the curiosity of my pupils up there, sir?" he continued. "They all wanted to see you. I never fail to give them every encouragement in my power, and it is my opinion, sir, that the mere sight of a graduate of Harvard and a poet whose work they have seen in print will be stimulating to them. These poor mountain boys and girls, Mr. Crofton, who have to work in the fields the greater part of the year, can never hope for such opportunities as you have had; but there is sterling worth and boundless energy in many of them. I am saying this as the introduction to something in the form of what may seem a bold request. We have our public debating evenings, which are well attended by adults as well as scholars, and while you are at your uncle's, if you would honor us by your presence we'd take it as a great favor. If you'd read one of your own productions to us we certainly would appreciate it. It would be a thing we'd long remember."

"I will do so with pleasure," Carter promised. "I can read fairly well, but I'm not a good speaker, so I shall beg you to excuse me from making a talk."

"Oh, I understand," the teacher smiled as he drew back to allow the buggy to go on, "and I shall keep you posted as to the date of our entertainment. We shall be deeply in your debt. I am not thoroughly familiar with *all* your work, so I shall beg you to make your own selection. Most of your poems which have come my way have been love-lyrics, and they are exquisite in form and sentiment. Your uncle tells me you have lately written a few on philosophical lines, which have not been published. I confess I am curious to see them, and, while I do not wish to influence you in your choice of what to read to us, I assure you anything of that kind will be more than welcome. I am sorry to say that some of my scholars here got to reading trashy novels, and I'd like to divert

THE INNER LAW

their minds into more wholesome channels. You see mine is a mixed school"—the teacher was now smiling—"and I have some pupils of both sexes who regard the institution as a sort of free matrimonial agency. A couple of them, who, although full grown, are still in the third reader, were planning to run away and get married last week. I happened to intercept some of their love-notes and sent for their parents. I understand they were licked good and sound." Lewis forgot his rules of grammar and laughed aloud as he finished: "It actually cured them. Do you know, they never looked at each other again after that. So you see the minds of such impressionable creatures as that pair ought not to be fed on sensational love-stories. I am glad you are leaning toward philosophy. Philosophy is in the air, and seems to be taking the place of the creeds in many quarters. Your uncle and I have had some wonderful chats. He is a remarkable man, and one I am not able fully to understand. He is certainly not what he used to be before he lost his wife and son. Sometimes I think he is living too lonely a life, and when I heard you were coming to keep him company I was delighted."

As the horse started onward Carter looked back toward the school-house. A youthful thrill of triumph passed over him, for not a face in the cluster was averted from him. A moment later he saw them gathering about their returning teacher. Something was said, and then Carter heard the lusty young voices cheering. Understanding the import of it, he waved his hat in response, and the cheering was repeated. He could not remember ever having felt so happy before. Even the girls were cheering and waving their handkerchiefs. And some of them were quite pretty. Yes, he was very happy, and to-morrow he would begin work on the great epic which, when finished, would surprise the world.

They were now almost within sight of the farm-house.

THE INNER LAW

The horse had stopped to drink at a clear, unbridged brook which crossed the road.

"Huh! dat so, dat so," Carter heard Hank muttering to himself.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, still elated over what had taken place at the school-house.

"Dat so, what de teacher say 'bout Marse Tom," the negro answered. "De Lawd know he ain't de same, an' you gwine ter find out he ain't, young marster."

"He's broken-hearted over his great loss," Carter said. "At his time of life, you see—"

"Huh! dat ain't it! My Gawd! dat ain't it!"

"You say it isn't?" Carter replied. "Well, what is it, then?"

"I don't know, young marster." The negro raised a sincere stare to the young man's face. "I don't know; my wife, Mandy, she don't know, nuther, an' it de fust time I ever seed 'er stumped, too. She kin tell 'bout white folks; you cayn't fool Mandy wid high or low—wid quality or white trash, an' she done give Marse Tom up. Me, too. I 'lowed once dat he was gittin' out'n his senses, but dat ain't it. No, suh. You wait till you see how he act. You gwine git puzzled—see ef you don't. 'Tain't jus' we-all at de house, nuther; folks fer miles around don't know what ter mek o' his doin's."

CHAPTER VII

THEY were now approaching the front gate of the Crofton farm-house. It was a spacious, rambling, one-story frame building which had more than a dozen rooms. It had a long, wide veranda in front, which was well provided with easy wicker chairs and benches. The house had been white at one time, but the rains had washed off most of the paint and left the walls with a fuzzy drab look. The windows had faded green shutters, and over the small panes hung ivy-leaves and morning-glory vines. A lattice of decaying woodwork surrounded the veranda, upon which honey-suckles grew in such neglected profusion that any one seated on the veranda could not be seen from the lawn in front. The lawn, which Carter remembered as being well kept on his last visit, had now a run-down appearance. Gullies were washed in what had been beautiful gravel walks, and the level, once grassy sward was overgrown with weeds and sprouting bushes.

As they drew in at the gate, which had a broken hinge and had to be lifted aside by the driver, Carter saw his uncle under the trees at the end of the house. He was bareheaded; he seemed unaware of their arrival, and was walking about, head down, his hands folded behind him. Hearing the gate-latch click, he turned quickly and came forward. Carter had the unpleasant impression that the smile slowly coming into his uncle's face was somewhat forced.

"Welcome! welcome!" the old man cried, extending his

THE INNER LAW

hand and grasping that of his nephew. "Just think of your having bad luck on your first day! I know you must have roasted at that hot station. Well, well, we'll make up for it. You can lie around here in the shade and forget it. Dinner is waiting for you. Come into your room and wash off the dust, and then we'll dine together."

The room to which his uncle led him, through a commodious entrance-hallway, was most inviting. In a corner stood a downy bed covered with a white counterpane and having great, cool-looking pillows. In the center of the room was a table which held some books and magazines, a reading-lamp, a tray with pipes and tobacco, and a box of cigars.

"How thoughtful you are!" Carter said. "You are treating me like a prince. I don't deserve it. I intended to live the simple life out here, but you will prevent it if you keep this up."

"You mustn't miss too many things," Thomas said, a touch of depression forcing itself into his would-be cordial voice. "I laid out some books I thought you might care to glance at, and the magazines have just come. You must really own the place while you are here. Go and come when you like—that's the only way, and will be best for us both. No poet likes regularity. Mrs. Romley, who is cooking for me now, will obey your every wish. She won't be disturbed if you dine at midnight or breakfast at noon. She is a good, faithful old soul. It came my way once to do a slight favor for her, and she has always overrated its importance. She is here before daylight every morning, and is working her fingers to the bone to please me. It is wonderful how grateful such persons are. I've tried to stop her—to make her take a rest—but she won't let up a minute. She is a poor widow with a young daughter to support, and they live in a log cabin in the edge of the woods close by. I've offered to build her a cottage nearer the house, but she has always lived

THE INNER LAW

in cabins of that sort, as a child, as a young married woman with a shiftless, drunken husband, and now she won't have anything else. Now I'll leave you, and will meet you in the dining-room. You must never wait for me after this. I have moods which can't be depended on, and eating has of late become almost the most objectionable thing I do. I only eat when I am obliged to; but you are young and full of blood, and out here ought to eat like a famished bear."

A few minutes later Carter went into the quaint, old-fashioned dining-room adjoining the kitchen at the end of the house. It was a large room, having a wide, deep oriel window at one end, into which the midday light streamed through stained glass and snowy lace curtains.

"Splendid! splendid!" Carter exclaimed as his uncle signified the chair he was to take at the long mahogany table which held a vase of fresh flowers. "It takes me back to—to— But pardon me, I must not remind you of—"

"Oh yes, you may," the old man said, his lips drawn tight. "Why avoid it? I can't forget him. So what's the use pretending? He is in my thoughts always, anyway, and I want you, above all, to be natural. We can't bring him back. I'll soon master it. I must—I must. Seeing you here without him, of course, digs deep into me to-day—more so than I thought it would; but that can't be avoided. To-morrow I'll be all right."

He was interrupted by the entrance of Mrs. Romley with a tray of steaming dishes.

"Here he is, Mrs. Romley," Thomas said in a lighter tone. "He is a fine, healthy sample of a boy, isn't he?"

The woman, who was about forty years of age, lifted her eyes in evident embarrassment, started to speak, but ended by saying nothing at all. It was plain to Carter that she was very illiterate, and that she had been, even as a servant, little with persons in the higher walks of

THE INNER LAW

life. She was tall, thin, and patient-looking. Her lips were stained with snuff, and her fingers were gnarled and stiff. Her body was bent as if from some burden she had borne from childhood.

"Mrs. Romley has been a godsend to me," the old man went on, in the light tone he was trying to effect. "Until she came to help me I was in desperate straits. The negroes could not be depended on. She seems of late almost to do my thinking for me. The only trouble is that I can't make her believe she is as valuable as she is."

Glancing at the woman's profile as she moved around the table, Carter noted a flushed look on her lined face that was one of almost pained denial. He saw her shrug her shoulders and heard a low grunt escape her lips, but that was all. He was hungry, after his ride, and the food had the delicious flavor which he had always found in country cooking. He noted, too, that Mrs. Romley seemed delighted by his evident appreciation. Her face brightened as he helped himself a second time from the dishes she brought in.

After dinner the old man led his nephew into the library, which adjoined the drawing-room in front of the house. "Here is your nest," he said, playfully. "It has been cleaned thoroughly and aired. I've added some new books which came only yesterday. You'll find them all there."

It was a fine room, oblong in shape and lighted by several broad windows which opened out in French fashion, like doors, on a pretty side porch.

"You can sit out there and smoke," Thomas added, indicating the porch with a movement of his hand, "and when you get an idea you can turn back in here and write it down."

Three sides of the room were lined with glass-doored black-walnut bookcases, which were filled with well-bound volumes, some of which looked very antiquated.

THE INNER LAW

Above the cases were some family portraits, the canvases and gold-leaf frames of which bore the stamp of age. Seeing Carter looking at them, his uncle sighed.

"They fell to me," he said. "Your father didn't care for them when the Crofton estate was divided up. I think I gave him a small town lot in exchange for his half-interest in them. For many years I dreamed of handing them down to—Tom, but now, of course, they must be yours. Your brother has no sentiment for such things, but the poet in you will cry out for them later in life."

"I certainly should value them highly," Carter said; "but you are too young a man to count on parting with any of your possessions."

Thomas seemed not to be listening. His eyes held a far-off stare in their depths. "Now amuse yourself," he said. "I have to ride over the mountain to see a tenant of mine who has rented some land from me, and I may not get back till bedtime—or even later. I wouldn't leave you alone if I did not know that solitude was the best possible condition for the creative temperament."

A feeling of rare elation was on the poet as he lounged in the easy-chairs and browsed among the books he found on the shelves. He heard a horse walking past the window, and, rising to look out, he saw Hank leading his uncle's favorite mount around to the front from the stable in the rear. The next moment he heard Thomas stalk heavily through the uncarpeted hall, cross the veranda, and clatter down the steps. Then the hoofs of the horse were heard crunching the graveled drive from the house to the gate.

Carter resumed his seat and took up his book, but to his surprise he found that he could not readily fix his mind on the words before his eyes. All at once he felt unpleasantly impressed by the sheer stillness of the lonely old house. The breeze blew against the vines at the windows, causing them to rasp the glass and mullions

THE INNER LAW

with an uncanny scratching noise. Young and sound of body as he was, Carter was, nevertheless, nervous at times, and he got up, opened the window from which the sound came, and with his penknife cut away the offending twigs. He was about to resume his seat when he heard Mrs. Romley softly shuffling from the kitchen out to a side door.

"Whar did he say he was goin' to?" she asked Hank, who was passing on his way back to the stable.

"He didn't tell me," replied the negro, "an' I didn't ax 'im."

"Why didn't you ax 'im?"

"'Ca'se 'twasn't none o' my business. I ain't er fool, white 'ooman. I knows my place, I does."

Hank was walking on, and, thinking that he might answer the woman's question, Carter went to her as she stood on the door-step. She was looking uneasily down the road at the little cloud of dust raised by her master's horse, and started suddenly and lowered her eyes as the visitor appeared on the threshold.

"You were asking about my uncle," Carter said. "He told me he was going to see a tenant of his over the mountain and might not be back till after dark."

The woman raised her eyes, a blank look on her face; then, nervously wiping her hands on her apron, she smiled in a forced sort of way.

"I just wanted to know," she faltered. "He 'ain't been overly strong here lately. Sometimes he tells me whar he's goin', an' sometimes he don't. I like to know, 'ca'se sometimes neighbors drop in to see 'im, an' I don't know what to tell 'em. They think strange ef I don't know whar he is."

He felt a vague desire to detain her as her slipshod feet bore her away, but he could think of no pretext for so doing, nor did he know definitely what it was that he wanted to ask her in regard to his uncle.

THE INNER LAW

He was in the library, reading, at four o'clock when she brought in a tray holding some cakes and tea.

"Oh, what's this, what's this?" he asked, with a playful laugh.

"Mr. Crofton told me to do it," she answered, simply. "He wants you to have tea every day at four o'clock—said you had it when you an' his son was off at school."

"So we did—so we did," he said, still smiling, "and it looks nice and smells delicious." He watched her place a little table near his chair, and arrange the things upon it. "Uncle is a fine man, isn't he, Mrs. Romley?"

She suddenly rested her two hands on the table, and, bending forward, she looked straight into his face. Her voice was full and almost broke as she replied:

"He's the best man that ever lived. He's the best an' kindest man that God ever made. Ef I stood here an' talked all day an' all night, I couldn't tell you how good he's been to me. He stood by me—he come to he'p me when all the rest of the world was agin me, an' he was a plumb stranger. He's a saint—that's what he is, a saint!"

"Yes, he's good." Carter was surprised by the woman's vehemence. "I love him more than any other living relative. He suffers awfully, Mrs. Romley. Life means nothing to him without his wife and son."

The woman was gazing into his eyes almost tearfully. Her lips moved as if she were trying to formulate some reply, but, suddenly sighing, she turned to leave. "Is thar anything else you'd like?" she faltered.

"Nothing else, thank you, Mrs. Romley." Again he felt the inclination to detain her, but, having no valid reason for so doing, he allowed her to shuffle out of the room.

CHAPTER VIII

CARTER had been at his uncle's a week. Never before had he so thoroughly enjoyed himself, and he was sure it was the sylvan solitude and quietness of the place that accounted for it. For the first time in his life he was living wholly in his imagination. When he waked in the mornings, instead of the rattle of wheels on pavements of stone, the clanging of bells, the tread of men's feet on the way to work in a sultry city, he heard the chirping of birds, the clucking of hens, the quacking of ducks, the barking of dogs, the crowing of cocks, and the bleating of sheep and calves. There was a bath-house close to the main building, where he and his cousin used to swim in the pool of running water, and invariably on rising now he drew on his bathrobe and took a plunge in the cold, clear stream. Then he rubbed his body briskly till his blood fairly tingled in his veins, and, going back to his room, he dressed for breakfast, smelling the delicious food which Mrs. Romley was preparing for him. He loved the uneventful routine of it all. He saw little of his uncle, Mr. Crofton being absent most of the time, but he did not miss him. In fact, he was conscious of a certain depression of his spirits whenever the old man happened to be with him at meals or joined him for an after-supper smoke on the veranda. He had given up trying to fathom his uncle's variable moods. Besides, there were too many other matters to think about. He had not penned a line of the great epic he was to write; but the general scheme of it was constantly in his thoughts. It

THE INNER LAW

was being born, he told himself—it was filling him, pouring in like some divine fluid from the infinite reservoir of beauty and truth, and soon it would force itself into adequate expression. That it would astonish the reading world he had no doubt. He was young, but his work would not be taken for that of a youth. A profound religious change had come upon him. He often found himself praying. He was inexpressibly grateful to God for the countless blessings which he possessed, and he wanted to express his gratitude. The sight of the simple farmers working in the fields in their scant and sordid clothing, Hank plodding about the malodorous stables or toiling with hoe or plow in the garden, the old woman shambling all day long in her patient, lonely way about the house—all these, by their sheer contrast to his own more fortunate condition, made him grateful. The mountain men tipped their coarse hats to him when they drove by him as he walked alone on the mountain roads, and if there were women or girls in the wagons they turned their heads and curiously stared after him. Of course they knew who he was, he thought—of course they had heard of the phenomenon of youth, good looks, wealth, and genius who was visiting the silent old aristocrat of the neighborhood, and they would go back home and tell others that they had seen him, and how he was rambling alone out in nature because there was nothing else he liked so well. He told himself that he had the means with which every taste or whim could be gratified, but that he was too much like Wordsworth and other outdoor poets to follow the bent of average men.

One morning he had a notable experience. Just after breakfast he went into the library to read and make some notes. With a copy of Browning, whose method he was studying, he had seated himself in an easy-chair at a window, when the sudden closing of a bookcase in a far corner of the room drew his attention. At first he saw

THE INNER LAW

only a mass of golden-brown hair, and then a startled flushed face and a pair of wonderful hazel eyes as the owner, a girl about eighteen years of age, stood up, a cleaning-cloth in her hand.

"Oh, I—I didn't know you was here!" she stammered. "Ma tol' me not to bother you. I didn't see you—thought you was out takin' a walk."

"I've just come in," he explained. "I didn't know you were here." She was moving, stumbling as she went, toward the door, and he detained her. "Don't stop your work. I can read on the porch. I was going to do so, anyway. I always sit there at this time of day."

She paused, undecided. "I've got plenty o' time," she said. "It don't have to be done now, nohow."

"Neither do I have to read now," he answered. "I have the whole day before me." He was taking in her appearance from head to foot. How wonderfully fresh and pink was her complexion! How erect and slender her form! Her coarse, untied shoes did not prevent his seeing that her feet were small and high of instep. The hand clutching the cleaning-cloth was tapering, though the skin was rough and tanned from outdoor work. "You are Mrs. Romley's daughter, I'm sure," he went on, gently, to allay her embarrassment; "but I don't know your christian name."

"Lydia," she answered, going back to the bookcase and picking up a book she had left on the floor.

"'Lydia'—that's a pretty name," he said, admiring her rare beauty afresh.

"I don't like it much," she said, as she wiped the book and restored it to a shelf. "I don't know why they ever named me that. I never saw a girl called by it that I know of. Pa used to call me Lyde, for short, when he was alive."

"They must call you Lydia; that is better," he said,

THE INNER LAW

wisely. "Have you read any of these books?" He indicated the shelves with a sweep of the hand.

"I can't read nor write," she answered, indifferently, as she took down another volume and began to wipe it. "I hain't never been to school none at all."

"But why?" he asked, wonderingly.

"I dun'no'. I just hain't. We never have happened to live nigh to any school, an' pa was a great hand to move about, fust one place an' then another, wherever he could rent land handy. He never could read hisself, nor sign his name. He made a cross mark, an' he said that was enough. Ma never could read, nuther."

"But you are missing a great deal," he said, sincerely. "Really, I think I should die if I were not allowed to read the thoughts of the great men of the past and present."

She shrugged her shapely shoulders. He noticed her beautiful neck and the fine poise of her head upon it. "It don't bother me," she replied. "I don't see that reading helps much. Look at all these books of Mr. Crofton's. He kin read 'em, can't he? Well, is he a happy man? I've seed a few men in my time, but he is the most miserable one I ever laid eyes on. Old Hank out thar goes about singin' half the time, an' I've heard 'im shout out loud as he was comin' home from a nigger meetin', an' he can't read a line in a book."

"All the same," Carter smiled, "it is our duty to educate ourselves if it is in our power. Say, do you come here often?"

"Once a week, on cleaning-day, to he'p ma."

"I see, and have you any sort of school-book at home?"

"I've got a ABC primer Mr. Crofton gave me last summer." She smiled, as if amused. "He tried to git me to study it. Lordy! it was awful! He axed me the names of the letters several times when I was here, but he soon let me alone. I reckon I'm a hard nut to crack. Book-

THE INNER LAW

learnin' is for folks that kin lie around idle, but I hain't got time. I have to work."

"What sort of work do you do?" he inquired, half amused.

"I work in the garden-patch," she said. "We got ten acres fer our own use around our cabin. I hoe, spade up ground, cut sprouts, grub, drap seed-corn an' cotton. I milk the cow, an' drive 'er up from the pasture. I go to the strip o' woods back o' the cabin an' chop up old trees fer the fireplace. I split kindlin', an' tote it an' the wood home. I churn an' make butter. I feed the chickens an' look after the hens' nests to keep 'em from settin' an' sp'ilin' the eggs. I take produce to the store an' git barter or cash fer it. Lordy! I've got enough to do. Huh! I reckon I have!"

"Still, you ought to learn to read and write," he contended. "You have as much right to an education as—as, well, my own sister, for instance. Have you ever seen her?"

"Yes, twice." The girl now showed more animation. She leaned on the table, her red lips parting over fine white teeth, deep dimples showing in her cheeks. "She was here last summer, but she didn't seem to have much of a good time. No beaus round here rich enough fer 'er, I reckon. I never seed 'er except when she was out walkin' with Mr. Crofton. They stopped at the cabin one day, an' she peeked in like she took it fer a hen-house or a chicken-coop. I listened at a crack as they walked off, an' heard her laughin' an' titterin' an' sayin' some'n to yore uncle. I don't know what she was talkin' about, an' I don't care. I know I didn't like 'er a bit."

"Oh, you didn't?" he laughed. "Did she say anything objectionable?"

"I don't know jest what you mean. She looked like she was afeard sh'd dirty 'er fine white dress, an' she had a funny sort o' tilt to 'er nose like she was smellin' some'n

THE INNER LAW

she couldn't stomach. She tried to poke fun at me in 'er high an' mighty way. She axed me ef I knowed I was pretty, an' looked all about the cabin an' said, 'La! you hain't got no lookin'-glass! Maybe you hain't never got a good look at yorese'f.' Ef Mr. Crofton hadn't been close by I'd 'a' give 'er a piece o' my mind, so I would—comin' thar in 'er fine town duds, makin' fun o' me in my rags."

Carter had risen and now stood close to the girl. "You must not be unfair to her," he said, firmly. "Sis is cold and stiff on a first meeting, but really she was not making fun. You *are* pretty, Lydia—there is no getting around that fact. You are very, very pretty. Really, I don't know of a girl in Atlanta who has half your good looks."

"You are pokin' fun, too," she said, with a little suspicious toss of the head. "I know how I look. Thar's plenty o' lookin'-glasses in this house, ef we hain't got none at home, an' I've had to clean 'em often enough, an' seed myself at it. They say fine feathers make fine birds, an' I hain't had nothin' but rags on since I kin remember."

"It is not really the clothes, in your case," he said, admiringly. "You are simply stunning without adornment. But to come back to that primer uncle gave you. Promise me that you will study the letters when you go home, and the next time you come here I'll see how well you know them. Will you do it?"

She avoided his ardent gaze. There was something exquisite about her profile, the curves of her pink lips, and the long heavy lashes which fell over her dark, somnolent eyes and lay lightly against her glowing skin. She made no response and he repeated his question. Emboldened by he knew not what, he bent down over her and, with his hand under her firm chin, he forced her to look at him.

"Will you promise?" he asked.

THE INNER LAW

"Why do you want me to?" She pushed his hand away, but not angrily.

"Because I am asking you as a friend—a new friend who wishes well by you, Lydia. You seem not to approve of town people, judging by your impression of my sister. Do you dislike me?"

She hesitated. She was looking straight at him now. He saw a charming flush creep up her pulsing neck, fill her cheeks, and mount to her eyes.

"Huh! that's different!" she said, evasively. "She's a woman, an' she's stuck up. She can't hide it. Sugar wouldn't melt in 'er mouth."

"Well, we'll leave sis out of it," he said, taking the little rough hand and holding it in his own, feeling the warm fingers throb. "This is just between you and me, Lydia. I want you to study those letters. If I can teach you to read a little this summer while I am here you will thank me all the rest of your life."

"Do you really *want* me to do it?" Unconsciously she pressed his fingers, and then quickly drew her hand away as if suddenly aware of the impulse she had obeyed.

"Yes, I'm in earnest," he answered, "very, very much in earnest."

Again she averted her face. She seemed to be struggling with an odd sort of pride which he could not comprehend. Suddenly she sighed deeply, turned to him and said:

"All right, I'll try. You'll find out that I'm a regular blockhead, but I'll do the best I kin. It will be a hard job. I hate the sight of a book, but I'll tackle them letters."

"Then it's a bargain," he said, warmly, and, taking her hand again, he pressed it firmly. He wanted to kiss it—he wanted to put his arm about her, but refrained.

He left her at her work and went for a walk along the mountain road. His blood was tingling in his veins.

THE INNER LAW

Something new and strange had happened to him. His body seemed charged with fresh energy, and he fairly bounded along the road. He tried to think of his epic, as had been his habit on such walks, but not a line of it came to his mind. He could think only of Lydia—of her face, her eyes, her form, her musical voice, her throbbing hand. Could he be in love? Had the divine passion at last kindled in his veins? And why not? Had any true poet ever been restrained by the condition in which he found his love? He thought of the great Rousseau and his unlettered mistress, and how the two had sat together till far into the night, blissfully happy.

He curtailed his walk, returning home at least an hour earlier than usual. With unconscious stealth of eye and movement he took in the various rooms, only to find that Lydia was no longer about the house. He fancied, and it came with a little shock of disappointment, that she had already finished her work and gone home. Meeting her mother in the hallway, he started impulsively to inquire about the girl, but a lurking intuition checked him, and he passed on without speaking. He went into the library and picked up a book, only to lay it down. He had loved it once, but now it was a cold, unresponsive thing. Then he bethought himself of the side porch, and the view from it of the field and meadow lying between the house and the cabin occupied by Mrs. Romley, and, stepping through the window upon the porch, he was rewarded by a sight of the girl as she slowly trudged homeward along a meadow path. How erectly she walked, and with what natural ease and grace! The sunlight fell on the rich, long hair which hung down beneath the simple straw hat. Oh, she was beautiful—beautiful! Beautiful of body and pure of soul! She was a revelation to him, he declared—the incarnation of an intangible personality dropped from the infinite. He fairly held his breath as he watched her moving in and out among the bushes till

THE INNER LAW

she vanished. Duty called him to his work in the library, but now it was all but repugnant to him. His whole young being was aflame with fires, the warmth of which he was feeling for the first time. Stepping out on the lawn, he threw himself down on the grass and buried his hot face in the cool blades.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" he exulted. "I'm in love, in love—actually in love!"

CHAPTER IX

HE was returning from one of his long walks on the mountain road one morning when he saw, approaching from behind, a sleek, richly harnessed pair of black horses, drawing a fine carriage which, besides the negro driver on the seat in front, held only a single occupant. He had concluded that it was some one unknown to him and was walking on, when he suddenly heard his name called out merrily.

"Hello! Well here you are, you dreamy star-gazer!"

Turning, he recognized the speaker as Charles Farnham, his most intimate friend, and his father's associate in the new railroad which Farnham was promoting.

"Hello!" he returned, quite pleased by the encounter. "What are you doing up here so far above sea-level? You are not trying to get a right-of-way through here, are you?"

"Hardly, but I did hope to see you while I was up this way. I had to go to Benton on railroad business, and am now on my way to your uncle's to see you. Say, do you want to ride, or shall we walk down this slope? I'm fairly stiff from sitting so long."

"Let's walk," Carter said. "It's fine along here."

"I might know you'd say that, you peripatetic poet. Drive on, Luke, and wait for us at the bottom," said Farnham, who was tall, about thirty years of age, well built, and richly dressed. He descended to the ground, clasping Carter's hand as he did so. The driver started his horses down the slope and the two friends fell in leisurely behind.

THE INNER LAW

"Yes, I wanted to see you." Farnham's blue eyes twinkled with interest, and he put his ringed hand familiarly on Carter's shoulder. "I often laugh when I think about you and me. I don't mean to underrate you at all, but there is almost ten years difference in our ages. I know I was a mere boy in experience at your age, but here I am to-day, while handling men of big capital of fifty and sixty years of age in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia—here I am coming to you, young as you are, as actually the most important man of all my business associates."

"What do you mean by that?" Carter asked, perplexed over the evident sincerity of his friend's tone.

"Well, I mean that the investment your father made in my railroad is a big enough slice of the whole thing to make any man important in my eyes at least. Money goes a long way with me, I confess."

"Well, what has that to do with *me*?" Carter asked.

"I see it is as I suspected," Farnham went on, still smiling. "He hasn't told you about it, and I have a surprise for you. Do you know, my boy, that he means this railroad stock to go to you?"

"I did not," Carter returned. "He seldom speaks to me of his business."

"Well, he has to me," Farnham replied. "He talks more freely to me, I think, than to any one else. What do you think of this? He made out his will in my office the other day. In fact, I was a witness to his signature. By George! it took me off my feet! I hadn't the least idea he was worth what he is. But the thing that pleased me most of all was that he is leaving you the entire interest in my railroad over and above your equal share with your brother and sister in the remainder of the estate. I'm going to tell you something, and I'm saying it without any ax to grind in the matter, for your father's money is paid in already, and I have nothing to gain one

THE INNER LAW

way or the other. We are friends, and I glory in your good luck, so I'm going to give you some inside, confidential news. My plans have worked out better than I could have hoped at the start. Your railroad stock is already worth two for one in the eyes of any man who knows what a safe investment is."

"Is it possible?" Carter exclaimed in slow surprise.

"Not only that, my boy"—Farnham was smiling and stroking his yellow mustache—"but even greater things still are in the wind in our favor. I've said nothing about this even to your father. The truth is, he talks too freely of late about his private matters, and I don't want any one to know this yet. He is overworking and needs a rest badly, so I say I have not confided in him; but I will tell you. In fact, I feel now that you are the chief one for me to consult in the matter as the largest stockholder next to myself in the company. The other thing in the wind is this: The W. L. & S. road went into the hands of a receiver the other day. It is in a terrible condition, and there are no ready funds behind it. Now, the A. S. & C., the main trunk line from St. Louis to Savannah, you know, need a short cut through these mountains, and have their eye on the W. L. & S. property; but it is tied up awfully and cannot be sold outright. Only the remainder of a ninety-nine-year lease is for sale, and the A. S. & C. want to actually own their line from end to end."

"I see," Carter said; "and you think—"

"I am sure they will have to buy us out, or take us in with them almost at our own valuation. Their directors are to meet ours in Atlanta early next month, and then something will be done. Shall you be home then?"

"I hardly know," Carter said. "I want to finish some work here. What you say is very interesting, but I'm afraid I'm not really a business man at heart. I've chosen this profession, you see, and I want to make the best of

THE INNER LAW

it. To be frank, business and social affairs seem to upset me. Since I've been out here with my uncle I have felt more like doing good work than ever before."

"I see," Farnham nodded, sympathetically, "and you may be right. Do you know, my boy, that you are actually the most fortunate chap I ever met? People all over the State are talking about you. If you don't have an ideal life it will be your own fault. Your dream has always been to live in Europe, you say. Well, you can do it. You won't have to think of where the money is coming from, and your writing and reading will keep your mind occupied. By George! you *are* fortunate! I couldn't possibly imagine a more lucky man. You are young and good-looking; you have health, strength, and brains; women will adore you; you will be the pet of every drawing-room. Your talent and standing will admit you to the very cream of society in Europe as well as America."

"You are rubbing it on," Carter said, with a flush he tried to subdue. "I have done nothing worth while so far. I've yet to prove myself, and I am going to pin down to work. I may stay here till winter. It all depends on the progress I make. I am doing a lot of helpful reading and making plenty of notes for future use."

"Well, I'll not bother you with the business end often," Farnham smiled. "We've been good friends, and it pleases me somehow to know that a scheme born in my brain is to benefit you so substantially. Money-making is my ambition, and poetry is yours. I'll swear we are an oddly yoked pair. I believe we are both going to win, and win big."

Carter laughed. "I know you are, anyway," he said. "And if I fail it won't be for lack of application and hard work."

They had reached the foot of the slope, and half a mile away saw the roof of the farm-house. Farnham caught

THE INNER LAW

the driver's backward glance and motioned him to drive on. Presently they came to the cabin occupied by Mrs. Romley and her daughter, and in front of it, in a little garden-patch, with a hoe in her hands, stood Lydia. Carter's heart bounded at the sight of her, but, fearing that his friend might read his thoughts, he refrained from looking at her.

"I see a well there," Farnham said. "I'm dying for some water. I suppose that young woman there would give us a drink."

"Yes," Carter answered, hesitatingly; "it is on my uncle's property. The mother of this girl is his house-keeper."

"Oh, I see," said Farnham. "Well, suppose you ask her."

"I'll draw it myself," Carter answered.

There was no fence between them and the cabin. It was a crude, one-room affair made of rough pine poles with the bark on them. It had a chimney formed of logs at the base and a pen of clay and sticks at the top.

As they drew near her, Lydia turned, and for the first time saw them. Her sunbonnet was pushed well back upon her head, exposing her face, which had suddenly flushed crimson.

"We want some water," Carter said. "Don't bother; we'll draw it."

She made no answer, and Carter passed on to the well, noticing that Farnham, who was almost reluctantly following him, had his eyes fixed on Lydia. While Carter was drawing the water from the well, Farnham stood watching the girl with undisguised admiration. The bucket was up, and Carter had rested it on the stone curb, and was looking about for a dipper, when Lydia went hastily into the cabin and came out with a goblet, which she placed by the bucket.

"Won't you have some?" Farnham tipped his hat, smiled, and started to fill the glass.

THE INNER LAW

"No, I don't want none," she said; and she turned back into the cabin, where she remained out of sight.

Farnham drank, but Carter declined. He felt an uneasy desire to get away from the spot—to prevent this man of the world from broaching a subject which he felt intuitively would be broached. He knew the man intimately, and felt that there were certain ideals concerning womankind to which he could never rise. Farnham's bold and even amorous stare at Lydia had offended him; his pausing now when there was no excuse for lingering was also annoying.

"I think I'll leave the glass at the door," Farnham said, with a significant smile. "I'd like to thank that little witch."

"Leave it where it is," Carter replied, coldly. "Let's go on. You've got to stay for dinner, and rest your horses."

"Yes, yes, I'll stay. I want to chat with your uncle. I can drive on in the cool part of the afternoon."

Carter saw him glance back at the cabin several times as they walked along the road. Presently Farnham exhaled a deep breath. "By George!" he exclaimed. "That is by long odds the most luscious little trick I ever laid eyes on. She'd turn the hearts of kings, alter the fate of nations, with those eyes and that pouting mouth, and you say her mother is a working-woman. You can see from her speech that she is of the lowest class herself. 'No, I don't want none!' How could such an expression as that come from such matchless lips as hers?"

"She is hardly more than a child," Carter said, still coldly. "She has had no chances. She can't—I understand from my uncle—that she can't read or write. She has had no chances. Her father's dead and her mother doesn't seem to bother about her education."

Farnham nodded. He was covertly watching his friend's profile and suppressed a shrewd smile. "Do you happen to know what her name is?" he asked.

THE INNER LAW

"Romley. That's her mother's name."

"Ah, I see." Farnham spelled, "R-a-m-l-e-i-g-h. That accounts for her beauty. I've read somewhere, and I've observed it myself, that many of these scrub mountain people are direct descendants of the bluest blood of England. This girl's name, no doubt, was originally Ramleigh. For all we know she may be a physical reproduction of some far-off earl's daughter with royal blood in her veins, and grace and beauty in every limb and feature. And her fate, my Lord! her fate!"

"What do you mean by *that*?" Carter demanded, almost sharply.

Farnham swept the face of his friend with his penetrating and still cautious glance. "Why, it will be hard for her anyway it turns out. Two things can happen to her, and both will be deplorable enough, if one is silly enough to look at it sentimentally. She will either marry some rustic, tobacco-spitting lout who will make a slave of her, load her down with screaming babies and hard work, or the other thing will take place. By the way, the last is most likely."

"I don't know what you mean," Carter answered, considerably nettled. He was becoming angry, and yet was ashamed to betray it to this man of varied experience, who, in a certain sense, had a right to his opinion.

"Oh no, you don't know what I mean, of course." Farnham now allowed himself to laugh sarcastically. "I've lived in these mountains myself, and I know what the average sons of well-to-do planters are like. The fact that this girl has no father, that her mother is a woman who will leave such a daughter unprotected here all day, is enough to prove my point. The inevitable will have to happen, and that very soon. The girl is only human, and, judging from that tempting mouth of hers and that wonderful development of body, she is a natural, passionate woman."

THE INNER LAW

Carter drew back coldly. He was still angry and trying to hide it. "You know I do not agree with you on these lines, Farnham," he said. "I believe in the innate virtue of women, high or low."

"I know you do." Farnham smiled, and laid his hand caressingly on Carter's shoulder. "That is the poet in you. You are still a boy, and a remarkably pure-minded one. I don't want you to be like me—really I don't. I'm having my fling, but I sha'n't always keep it up. One of these days I'll settle down. I'll marry the right sort of woman and make as good a husband and father as the average man. You will have your fling, too. Who ever heard of a poet that didn't? Oh yes, you will wake up one of these days and smile as you look back on your present rather callow frame of mind. You couldn't be a Crofton and act otherwise. I'll give you another twelve months. No, I won't, either"—here Farnham glanced back at the cabin and softly laughed—"if you spend the summer here I'll be your Father Confessor in the fall."

Carter frowned and the flush in his face deepened. "The trouble with you is that you have a foul mind," he said, sharply. "You may not know it, but you have." Farnham again laid his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Pardon me, my boy," he said. "You are too young and full of dreams now to understand what I mean, but you will later. I may be wrong, but I really think the Puritanical ideas in this so-called land of the free are robbing our men of all personal liberty. Frankly, it would be impossible to meet in all Europe a rich young poet of aristocratic birth with the flabby sexual ideas of a mountain Methodist parson. I have never had patience with such views. I have mixed red-blooded, normal pleasure with every bit of success I've had. I closed a big land deal once with a man whose stunning, daredevil wife and I— Oh, but never mind. I don't want to shock you. You are a boy yet—you really are."

THE INNER LAW

They were nearing the farm-house now, and saw Thomas Crofton coming to the gate to meet them.

"Ask that old chap to tell you some of his college experiences," Farnham chuckled. "I've heard my father say he was the wildest young buck he ever knew. He talks like a saint now, but he certainly was on the turf at one time. Well, King David, who gave us many of the Psalms, was worse than I ever was. The great Solomon was the result of conduct that would deprive a man of club membership in any country to-day."

CHAPTER X

A MONTH passed. There was only one thing which stood between Carter Crofton and peace and contentment, and that was his unexpected inability to do actual productive work. Periodical spells of moroseness attacked him, and he was constantly haunted by the fear that his muse had permanently deserted him. There had been only one palliative to these miserable moments, and that was his frequent, almost daily, visits to Lydia's cabin and the helpful lessons he had given her in reading and writing. He had not actually wondered over the fact that these visits had been clandestine, though he remembered the relief and satisfaction he had experienced when she had somewhat reluctantly complied with his adroit request not to inform her mother of his coming. It pleased his fancy to feel that they had such a sweet secret between them. Whose business was it but their own, anyway? he often asked himself, and so he never went to the cabin without being sure that his uncle was away and that Mrs. Romley was occupied with her duties at the farm-house. Lydia had grown more beautiful mentally and physically, and she was learning rapidly. He believed, in a certain way, that his feeling for her was love of the highest type, and yet, somehow, he had never quite thought of her as his future wife. That vaguely seemed out of the question, a desired thing not to be realized. It could not be, and yet he told himself that he had every natural right to love her as he did, and even to rejoice in her love; and she loved him; he was sure of that. She had shown it in

THE INNER LAW

many ways. That fact had given him joy unspeakable, and the strangest thing in it all was that he had never allowed himself to look ahead to the time when their inevitable separation would bring unhappiness to them both, to her more than to himself, for whom the attractions and triumphs of the great outside world were waiting. He took the thought of her with him in all his mountain rambles; she was in his mind when he went to sleep at night. She haunted his dreams. Her childlike dependence on him was inexpressibly sweet. Her profound ignorance of the ways of the world at large, her soft, crude speech, were full of charm to him, and he delighted in telling her of what he had seen, heard, and read. She was to be the chief sylvan figure in the great poem he was to write before long.

There was something pitiful in her effort to make herself attractive in her poor rags and the few soiled ribbons she possessed. One day he found her wearing a pair of new shoes which her mother had bought at the country store. They were heavy, clumsy in appearance, and ill-fitting, and yet he saw that she was pleased to have them. He thought of the beautiful garments, only slightly worn, which he had seen his sister sell to the negroes of the neighborhood, and how they would become the poor girl, and yet he never spoke to Lydia of her clothes, telling himself that his flower of the forest was beautiful enough as he had found her.

One afternoon he went through the woods that he might not be seen by any one on the road, and crept up close to the front of the cabin without being noticed by her. She was seated on the door-step, studying the book he had brought her on his last visit. For several minutes he stood hidden in the little thicket, feasting his eyes upon her. Then something happened which filled him with joy. She suddenly put down the book on the step and, standing up, stared anxiously along the road toward the

THE INNER LAW

farm-house. He held his breath in the sheer delight of the moment, for he heard her sighing.

"She thinks I'm not coming to-day," he chuckled, "the dear, dear girl!"

Then he moved around through the bushes so softly that she was unaware of his nearness, and managed to hide himself from her view behind a tall ash-hopper close to the wall of the cabin. He heard her sigh again, and then she turned back and went into the cabin. He heard her move about over the rough floor, and soon she came out with her arms full of clothes to be washed. There was a big tub on a bench near the well, and into it she put the things, pressing them down firmly. Then she turned to the windlass and began to lower the bucket into the well. She was drawing it up when he suddenly ran up from behind.

"Booh!" he cried, playfully. "You pretty little thief! What do you mean by stealing my water?"

She was so startled that she released the handle of the windlass and with a whir of the rope the bucket fell back into the well. Her color ran high, enhancing her beauty, as it always did in his eyes. She gave him a shy, warm look of delight, and then, grasping the windlass, she started to wind the rope up.

"Let me," he cried, catching hold of it, his hands touching hers.

"No, no," she said, firmly, still holding the handle. "You sha'n't!"

"I sha'n't?" he laughed. "Who are you ordering about, you beautiful young siren? Let go or I'll kiss you. I swear I will."

"You won't—you won't dare to!" she answered.

"I'll show you, if you don't let go," he said, pale with passion. For a moment their eyes met, and then she released the handle of the windlass and stood aside, her beautiful lips pulsing and twitching, her wonderful eyes

THE INNER LAW

full of the flames he liked to see and trace to their source. He drew up the water, laughing triumphantly as he did so. "Now where shall I pour it?" he asked.

"In the tub," she said. "The clothes have got to soak."

He emptied the bucket and drew it up full several times, with boyish pride in showing that he could do manual labor when it was necessary.

"That's enough," she said, presently. "Look how you've splattered yore clothes. You are soakin' wet."

"It doesn't matter," he answered. He noticed the book she had left on the step, and, pointing at it playfully, he said, "Get that book and let me hear you read the first chapter."

"I won't do it," she said, firmly, a rebellious expression in her eyes.

"Why won't you?"

"Because you'll laugh as you did t'other day."

"No, I won't; on my honor I won't. Get the book."

"I hain't the time," she said. "I've got my work to do. I've got to make a fire under the pot to boil some o' the clothes." She glanced at the three-legged iron vessel which, raised on flat stones, stood near the tub.

"Then I'll make the fire," he said. "I've got some matches. I can soon start one. I'm a good hand at fire-building. I was at a camp last summer up in Maine with some Boston fellows. We learned all about wood-craft. I started a fire once with only some dry leaves and a sun-glass. Wise as you are, you little minx, I'll bet you've never seen *that* done. But a match will have to do to-day. Get me a piece of paper."

She shrugged her shoulders indifferently. "Huh!" she ejaculated. "We don't need no match or paper. I'll bring a shovelful o' coals from the chimney and some o' the dry kindlin'-wood on the hearth."

"I see," he said, crestfallen. "Of course that will save time."

THE INNER LAW

She turned into the cabin, and he followed her. She took up the iron shovel and filled it with live coals.

"Let me," he said.

"No; you'll drop 'em on the floor," she protested. "I know how to do it better'n you do. A body has to tote 'em powerful steady."

"Then I'll bring some kindling," he said, and he picked up several pieces of the rich pine sticks which lay in the chimney-corner.

She carried the coals out and put them under the pot and allowed him to lay the pine upon them. She turned back to the windlass.

"Now what are you going to do?" he asked.

"Draw up some water and fill the pot," she answered, beginning to lower the bucket.

"Let me!" he cried, catching hold of the handle, his hands against hers.

"No; git away—it 'll fly back an' hit you," she warned him.

"Let loose, Lydia," he demanded, his face close to hers.

"Let loose or I'll kiss you."

Their eyes met, each could feel the heat of the other's face. She had given in and stood aside before, but something prevented it now—something she could not have fathomed. She held on tightly. His face changed. If he could have seen his reflection in a glass at that instant he would have thought he resembled his brother Henry more than ever before. His veins rose; his lips were full and quivering. He was panting. He was aflame from head to foot. His neck was crimson and seemed too large for his collar.

"I've given you fair warning," he said, almost fiercely, and swallowing as he spoke. "I'm going to count three, and if you don't let go I'll kiss you on those maddening lips of yours or die trying. One, two, three!"

Lowering her head, she clutched the handle defiantly.

THE INNER LAW

With a grunt, half threat, half triumph, he put his arms around her, drew her away from the windlass, and they wrestled to and fro for a moment. Finally she ceased to struggle, and, forcing her head back on his left shoulder, he kissed her half a dozen times on the mouth. She made no protest now. In fact, she almost smiled into his eyes as she closed her own. Out of breath, he was about to release her, when he thought of something else.

"Put your arm around my neck, you little devil! you angel!" he demanded. She hesitated, and then slowly obeyed. "Now, kiss me *yourself*!" he muttered, his voice far down in his throat. "Again! again! again! There."

He released her. "Now I guess you'll let me draw the water."

With her head down, her fine hair tousled and veiling her flushed, contented face, she stood and let him fill the pot. The sun was almost behind the hills. The shadows were lengthening eastward. The air was growing cooler. Suddenly she started into the cabin.

"Where are you going now?" he questioned.

"To get the clothes and sheets to boil."

"Oh, I see." He stood quivering all over. He saw her disappear within. He heard her tread on the creaking floor. He followed to the door and looked in. She was standing near the great snowy bed, and, seeing his shadow on the floor, she faced him. They looked at each other mutely and steadily for a moment. He was advancing when she said, sharply, and in a tone of alarm:

"Don't come in here."

"Why?" he asked, huskily. "Why, Lydia?"

"Because I say you mustn't—that's why."

"But you know you can't order me about," he laughed, hoarsely. "You've tried that and failed, you know. You've got to kiss me again—just once, darling, and then I'll go home. I will—I swear I will."

"Don't come in here—don't!" she repeated, shrinking

THE INNER LAW

back against the wall. "You mustn't—Carter, you mustn't!" She had never spoken his christian name before. Its startled utterance now was like a cry for mercy.

"Humph! how silly you are!" He strode across the threshold, and as she ran into a corner of the cabin he followed and took her into his arms. She pushed him from her desperately, pleadingly, several times, and then, out of breath, and overpowered by his strength, she let him hold her close to him and kiss her on the mouth.

An hour later he came out of the cabin alone. The sun was down. The soft gray fringe of night lay over the hills and mountains. The sticks had burned down under the pot. Without looking behind him, he strode quickly toward the thicket in front of the cabin. Once there, he paused and glanced back, but Lydia was not in sight. His hair was tousled, his necktie disarranged, his collar crumpled.

"My God! what have I done!" he cried. "Oh, my God!—my God!—my God!"

He sank down on the grass, buried his face in his hands, and uttered a low groan. "What have I done? Oh, what have I done? I'm a fiend, a devil—the fire of hell was in me. She was as helpless as a sparrow in the hand of a giant. My God! I'm like Henry and all the rest."

Presently he got up and peered through the bushes. He saw Lydia emerge from the cabin and walk slowly and disconsolately to the well, a pail in her hand. She averted her face and wiped her eyes. She was crying.

"Oh, I love her—I love her!" he cried, "and yet I've wrecked her sweet young life. Oh, my God! something must be done! I'll not forsake her." He felt actually weak; his knees shook as he made his way over the fallen leaves and twigs out into the road. Ahead of him he saw

THE INNER LAW

a man with bowed head walking in the direction he was going. He checked his steps that the man might go on, but the man kept stopping and looking back. Then he noticed that the pedestrian had turned and was coming toward him. It was Thomas Crofton. Carter was tempted to step into the wood at the side of the road, that he might not be seen, but he feared that he had already been recognized. In a moment they met.

"I was looking for you," the elder said. "You are later than usual."

Carter's eyes flickered. He glanced toward the mountain road, now only dimly outlined in the dusk. "I walked a little too far to-day," he said, evasively.

"You mean that—that you've—you've just come down from the mountain?"

"Yes; I go there nearly every day. I can't always keep track of the time when I am preoccupied. I—I get to thinking over my—work and almost forget that I own a body that has to be properly fed."

"I see." Thomas was looking at the disordered tie and collar and the crumpled coat. A great fear seemed to lie in his grave eyes as he turned homeward and trudged along by his silent nephew.

They were at the gate when Carter suddenly remarked, "You said, I think, that you started out to meet me. Was it anything of importance?"

"Oh, I forgot—I entirely forgot!" the old man answered, with a start. "I did want to see you at once. About two hours ago a telegram came from Milly. She says your father is not well. Henry is away and she is all alone. It seems that your father has had a sort of nervous breakdown. He keeps asking for you, and your sister thinks you ought to come home, for a few days, anyway."

Carter stepped forward to open the gate. "What do you think? Would you advise my going?"

THE INNER LAW

"Yes, you'd better go. You have plenty of time to pack your things and catch the ten-o'clock train in the morning. Yes, yes, you'd as well go."

"Are you keeping back anything from me?" the young man asked as they went up the steps together. "Is my father seriously ill?"

"Not as yet," Thomas returned; "but your sister needs you. I have no right to detain you here any longer just now."

After supper was over the old man went out on the lawn with his cigar. His nephew had always joined him before, but he failed to do so to-night.

"He is packing his things—that must be it," Thomas mused. He walked around to the side of the house whence he could see the window of his nephew's chamber. It was lighted. The old man paced restlessly back and forth on the dewy sward. The fire of his cigar went out. He locked his hands behind him.

"He was there alone with her!" he said, with a groan. "There is no doubt of that, for I saw him leave, but I will not believe the worst—I simply won't; I can't! It may have been only for a short while. I'll swear he was pure at breakfast. No one could have spoken as he did about his plans and work and be otherwise. His father's illness may be providential. God has sent it to remove him in the nick of time. No, I won't believe it—I won't, I won't! It is the old evil in me that makes me suspect him. This may have been his first visit, and he may have had a good reason for going. But, my God! the look of him! And he lied—he surely lied about his walk. *Yes, yes, he lied!*"

CHAPTER XI

MILICENT met her brother the next day at noon at the depot in the city. He saw her in the throng of persons waiting at the iron gate leading to the street. Her face had a worn, distraught look as she kissed him in her usual perfunctory way and drew him toward the waiting-room.

"Larkin drove me down; the carriage is outside. I wanted to speak to you privately, and couldn't wait for you to get up home. Oh, I was so afraid you'd miss this train!"

"Then father is critically ill?" he said.

"No, it isn't that," she answered. "He is up and about; but—"

"Ah, then it is Henry!" he cried, impatiently and with a touch of anger. "The rascal must be in fresh trouble?"

She gave a little negative shake to her head, which he failed to see, and remained silent. He saw Larkin, whip in hand, outside, and he led Milicent toward him. In a moment they were in the vehicle, the negro had closed the door, climbed up to the front seat, and they were bowling swiftly homeward through the busy, dusty street. He thought he understood now. Henry had at last got into really serious trouble. The telegram had been so worded as to mislead any one who might happen to read it. Perhaps he was under arrest, charged with some grave offense. But he couldn't be angry at his brother now, for was he not quite as bad? After all, could Henry have ever committed a more despicable act than the one with

THE INNER LAW

which his whole being had just been stained? Poor, ignorant Lydia! He had wrung hope and purity out of her fair life and left her without a word of explanation. Something must be done, but what? That was the question which had robbed him of tranquillity and caused him to toss and writhe on his bed in sheer agony of remorse through the entire previous night.

"So it is not father, after all," he said, catching his sister's perturbed upward glance. "Then it is Henry. What has he done now?"

"It is father," she answered. "I said he was not down in bed; but it is even worse than that; he has lost his mind."

"Lost his mind? Ridiculous! Why—" Carter broke off, checked by the girl's despondent face and eyes.

"Dr. Lloyd says it is softening of the brain," she went on, more calmly. "There is no hope of ultimate recovery—absolutely none. This is the first attack. Later, they say he will lose vitality and be easier to control. Now he wants his own way, and it is awful—simply awful. At times he loses the use of his tongue and doesn't know he is speaking indistinctly. He stammers out questions and gives fierce orders, and when we don't understand he goes into a frightful rage. The doctor sent a strong nurse—a man by the name of Perry—to stay with him; but the sight of the fellow infuriates him. He keeps asking for you, and cries like a baby over not seeing you. He says you are the only one who is not against him."

"But how did it first come on?" Carter was trying to drive Lydia from his mind, but the memory of her and her sad plight thrust itself on him in spite of the grave information he was receiving.

"I began to notice that something was wrong immediately after you left," Milicent went on; "but I thought it would pass away, and so I did not write to you. Father

THE INNER LAW

came into my room one night and began to contend that Henry was plotting to rob him. He sat up half the night trying to convince me of it, and made several insane statements to prove his point. He said he saw Henry in front of a barroom with some notoriously bad men one day, and when he passed them they all stopped talking and looked down suspiciously. Then he said one of the men dogged his steps to his office and peered at him through the window.

"The next day Henry came home from Rome, and father acted in the most cowed and servile manner before him. He voluntarily gave Henry a considerable sum of money, much to Henry's surprise. I did not want to hurt Henry's feelings, and so I did not explain. After Henry had gone down-town, father laughed heartily, and said that he did it to keep Henry from poisoning him. He warned the cook not to allow him in the kitchen. He stopped drinking coffee, and smelled his food before eating it. After that he got worse and worse. He was up prowling about the house all night, constantly on the lookout for the men he said Henry had employed to rob him. I am sorry for Henry. He doesn't deserve this, at least."

"But when was father taken as he is now?" Carter asked.

"Only the day before yesterday. They telephoned me from the bank that he was there angrily making some sort of demands that they could not understand. He had lost the use of his tongue and could not write. I hurried down to the bank, and found him almost in a comatose condition in the president's office. Later he revived somewhat and readily came home with me. It was after that that he became so hard to control. So, you see, I had to send for you. The mere sight of Henry infuriates him, and at times he even raves out against me. His latest idea is that Henry has killed you to get your part of the estate, and that I am hiding the truth from him. I saw

THE INNER LAW

Charley Farnham that morning at the bank. He advised me to telegraph for you. He said you could do more with father than all the rest of us put together. I told father that I was going to meet you, and he laughed and cried like a child."

"Where is he now?" Carter asked.

"He is at home—at least he was when I left half an hour ago. Mr. Perry was watching him. Father often tries to go down-town, but he keeps him back."

"And Henry, where is he now?"

"Oh, I don't know. He has kept away from the house since father's breakdown. Larkin saw him on the street yesterday, and thinks he is drinking again."

They were entering the drive at the house now. No one was in sight except Perry, the nurse, who stood in the front door, carelessly eying them. He approached them as the carriage drew up in the *porte-cochère*, tossing aside the cigarette he was smoking. He jerked his thumb toward Gilbert's room up-stairs.

"He's lying down." A satisfied smile lay on his fat, smooth face, and he shrugged his massive shoulders. He wore no coat, and his shirt-sleeves were supported by tight elastic bands above his elbows. His strong wrists were covered with hair. He had once been a butcher. He had a low brow and a ponderous jaw.

"Is he asleep?" Milicent asked. "Mr. Perry, this is my brother Carter."

"Pleased to make yore acquaintance, I'm sure," said the big man. "Yes, I think the old gent is dozing a little. Maybe I didn't have a time with 'im, miss, after you drove off. He got all sorts o' notions in his head, an' I couldn't get 'em out. Yore other brother drove by with some more sports just now, and stopped to get something of his out of his room, and the old gent saw him. Why, he's a funny old duck! Do you know he begun to whimper, he did, and plead with yore brother about some-

THE INNER LAW

thing or other, an' when yore brother was up-stairs in his room yore pa got scared an' broke an' run behind the house an' hid in the stable. He closed the door an' bolted it on the inside. I tried for a half-hour or so to get 'im to open it, an' then had to climb in through the loft. If I hadn't 'a' been strong as three of 'im I'd 'a' been in a tight hole, for he had a piece o' plank in his hand, an' stood ready for me. I forced it from 'im, and finally got 'im quiet. But I'm no good at this job. He's agin me, an' I never have any luck with patients who get that way. I was telling Dr. Lloyd this morning that the case was more'n I can handle. I don't sleep, you see, an' I'm gettin' shaky. The old gent wakes every ten minutes through the night, an' is always cocked an' primed for a row. Listen! I hear 'im now. Say, Mr. Carter, I'd advise you to go up to 'im. He dotes on you, an' has been worried about you. You may not like his looks; he can't shave hisself, and won't let a barber touch 'im. I'd go up now, if I was you."

"Yes, go up at once," Milicent urged.

Carter complied, and as he ascended the stairs which he had known from infancy every bright dream of his life seemed to have vanished. Young as he was, he was now practically at the head of the family. The strong mind upon which he had always relied now lay in ruins, as the consequence of a life ill-begun and ill-spent. And what was his own beginning? Had not that already happened which could never be forgiven? He suppressed a groan. His feet seemed to have weights attached to them. It was, to his sensitive fancy, almost as if the calamity which had befallen his family was a visitation of Providence on himself.

Entering his father's chamber, he saw the old man seated on the edge of his bed. He had thrown the pillows, sheets, and coverings on the floor. One of his shoes was in the bed, the other he held in his quivering hands, and

THE INNER LAW

was trying to draw it on a foot without a stocking. His face was averted. His son saw only his profile. A four days' growth of gray beard bristled on his cheeks and chin. He was ghastly pale; his cheeks were sunken; dark splotches were beneath his glaring eyes; and saliva trickled from the twitching corners of his mouth down on his crumpled and soiled shirt-front. He did not note Carter's presence till he stood in front of him. Then, with a glad cry, he sprang up and caught his son in his arms. He stammered unintelligibly, burst into tears, and began to whimper. Then, somewhat calmer, his speech became more distinct.

"W-w-where you been? W-where'd he put you? I knew it was his plot. He heard about your railroad interest. That was t-t-too much for the scamp. He and his gang of bloodthirsty thugs wanted to put you out of the way so he could nab it up himself. I fixed the will on purpose. I didn't want to leave him so much to squander on sots and dirty hussies. H-he'll have more than he deserves, sharing equally with Milly; but you'll get the plum. Huh! Ask Farnham. That railroad stock is c-c-climbing by leaps and bounds. Y-you've got the brains of 'em all. Y-y-you are clean and decent, too. You are all I've got. Mil-Mil-Milly's in cahoot with Henry. Oh, they can't fool me! I—I don't let on to them that I am on to their game, but I am—I am. She put this big thug here. He throws me down, beats me in the face, and spies on me, the sneaking dog! They are all against me. They won't pay me my own money at the bank. Henry has been there and bribed them, and Milly—"

"Father, listen," Carter said, huskily. "You are mistaken. You only fancy that they—"

"Hush!" Gilbert sniffed, and then laughed out derisively. "I see—they are trying to hoodwink you, too. But you pay attention to me. I know a thing or

THE INNER LAW

two. Say, we must get away from them. We can't stay here."

"Never mind, never mind," Carter said, soothingly. "I'll take care of you." He was experiencing something new and vastly tender. A strong yearning possessed him to caress the bowed and broken man. They seemed to have changed positions in regard to each other. Young as he was, he felt toward the old man as a father to a helpless child. His breast ached with a pitying tenderness. Sobs hung in his throat, tears were in his eyes. He sat down by his father and helped him put on his stockings and shoes. Gilbert was calmer now and shrewder. He fell to laughing softly and triumphantly.

"Oh, we'll fix them!" he kept chuckling. "Between us we'll settle their hash. Huh! If they don't look out I'll cut them out altogether and send them adrift to beg their bread, so I will. They are entirely too meddlesome and anxious to handle my funds before I'm underground."

Carter remained in the room for an hour. He noticed a vacant stare in the old face, and then, grown drowsy, Gilbert allowed him to take off his shoes and put him to bed. Soon the old man was asleep. Carter stood at a window, looking down on the lawn. He saw Dr. Lloyd, a middle-aged man of portly frame, drive in at the gate. A few minutes later he heard the low sound of the muffled door-bell, and Milly's subdued voice at the door. Carter decided that he would go down, but he dreaded the encounter. He did not want to meet any one, for any reason at all. Insanity had been a thing which had always horrified him, and now it had come to his own father. But the doctor would expect him, and he must go down. He was now the only man in the family who could be depended on, and he must do his duty.

He found the doctor and Milicent in the library, conversing in low tones, and when Carter entered the room she rose and went out.

THE INNER LAW

"You are the best medicine he could have," Dr. Lloyd smiled, as he got up and shook Carter's hand. "Nobody else can do so much with him as you. You see, he has sufficient mind left to reason a little, and he knows something is wrong, having Perry here, you know, who has to restrain him by force once in a while."

Carter nodded. He was trying to appear calm. "What do you advise?" he asked, his voice sounding harsh and guttural to himself.

"I was just consulting with your sister in regard to the only course open to us," Lloyd said. "The truth is we can't keep him here at home. It is wholly impossible. We haven't the facilities, and a disease such as he has often progresses rapidly. He might become actually dangerous, you see. We must put him in a sanitarium where he can have constant medical attention and necessary restraint."

"So," Carter sighed, "you don't think this attack is, in any sense, merely temporary?"

"Oh no. We'd as well face the truth, unpleasant as it is, my dear boy. There is no known cure for paresis, and I'm afraid, from the symptoms, that your father cannot live very long. He is losing vitality rapidly, but the routine of a good sanitarium will prolong his life, if anything will."

"What is the primal cause of the disease?" Carter asked, simply.

The doctor looked at him steadily for a moment. It was as if he were about to speak quite frankly, but on second thought he seemed to change his mind. "The disease is—well, rather hard to account for, but since you are young and of a sensitive, imaginative type, I feel that it is my duty to assure you of one thing positively, and that is, it is not in any sense hereditary."

"I've heard that it was not," Carter answered, rather bluntly, in his despair; "but it seems to me that I have

THE INNER LAW

read that it is the final result of a certain blood disease which young men contract early in life, and which seems for a time to be cured, but which lies dormant and—”

“I see you understand,” Dr. Lloyd interrupted. “It is wonderful how much you poets read. I suppose it can do you no harm to comprehend the situation thoroughly. We needn’t discuss that particular feature further, but it is quite likely that your father would have thrown it off much longer if he had not had such a strenuous business career. He has had enough on his mind to have killed a dozen ordinary men.”

There was a rather awkward silence. Presently Carter said, “Then you think he ought to be taken away?”

“Yes, and at once. I happen to know personally Dr. Hamilton of the Sunnyside Sanitarium, near Cincinnati—only a few miles out. The fact is, I telegraphed him yesterday, and find that he has an opening and will do all he can for us. The only thing that was worrying me was that we might have trouble in getting your father to go quietly. But if you will allow me to suggest it, I think it would be best for you to take him.”

“Do you think I could do it?” Carter asked.

“Yes, for this reason: your father fancies that your brother and sister are against both you and him, and he says that he and you are going to leave Atlanta. Now if you will only humor him in this whim of his I am sure he will go with you without any trouble at all. Of course, once you have him within the grounds of Dr. Hamilton’s establishment all your responsibility will be over.”

“Yes, I think I had better undertake it,” Carter consented.

At this moment Milicent returned. “I’ve been worrying about father’s business,” she said to her brother. “Do you suppose he has paid the premiums on his life-insurance?”

“Yes, I am sure he has,” Carter replied. “I heard him speak of it at the office one day.”

THE INNER LAW

"There is another thing," Dr. Lloyd said. "I am convinced that my man Perry is doing more harm than good just now. He seems to infuriate your father, and I think I'll take him away at once. Now that you are here, Carter, I think you won't need him. The train leaves at ten o'clock to-morrow night. We can reserve the drawing-room in the sleeper. If you say so I'll attend to all the details. I'd go along myself, but he won't need medical attention, and my presence would rouse his suspicion."

"Very well, thank you," Carter answered. "I'm sure you know best, and I'll follow your instructions."

"Then I'll take Perry back with me," Lloyd said. "He has very little tact, and believes too much in brute force for a case like this. Your method is best, Carter. I see that by the way you are already handling your father."

CHAPTER XII

THAT evening, just after nightfall, Carter sat alone in the big parlor. Never before had he believed that such terrible depression of spirits could come to any one as now lay upon him. Presently he heard a cautious step on the walk in front of the house, and a moment later Henry tiptoed across the veranda and entered the hall. Carter rose and went to the door just as his brother was putting his hat and cane on the rack.

"Hello!" Henry said in an undertone. "So they made you hustle home, eh?"

Carter drew him into the dimly lighted parlor. "Don't wake him," he said, with a warning gesture toward his father's room. "He is resting quietly."

"By God! it's time!" Henry answered, with a surly grunt. "I know I'm tired of the whole damned thing. I met Perry down-town. He told me about the old man's fool notion in regard to me."

"You mustn't notice it," Carter said, gently. "He doesn't know what he is doing or saying."

"Well, I'm glad you are going to take him off," Henry said, indifferently. "The whole town is gabbing about it. I'm going to get something to eat, and make myself scarce afterward. I'm sleeping at the club. I have a guest from out of town. If you need help let me know. Say, how do I look? Bum, eh? I've been soaked for a week. I came within an inch of the jimmies yesterday. I'm going to let up. I'm no fool. I'm going to cut the rum route off my map. I don't wish the old man any ill

THE INNER LAW

luck, but I understand he'll never get well, and a slow, lingering death is unpleasant all round. They say he made his will before he lost his mind and all three of us children share equally. I was afraid he was going to act nasty with *me*, and I'm glad he did the fair thing. It will be different with me when I have capital of my own. This way of going to him for every penny I need is a pretty tough proposition. It kills self-respect and ambition."

Half an hour later Carter saw his brother pass out at the door and go blithely down the walk, lightly swinging his cane in his hand. How was it, he asked himself, that the family calamity could rest so lightly on Henry while it had become such a weighty, far-reaching horror to him? Why was it, too, that that one indiscretion with Lydia seemed so unpardonable, when Henry had forgotten many such experiences? Was it due to an exceptional disposition? Yes, that must be it. He was imaginative, full of ideals and the teachings of great minds, while Henry was sordidly practical, materialistic, and unread. Did he and his brother have separate laws according to which each was to live? And was the one who had the higher light expected to live a better life than the one who had scarcely any light save that which, phosphorus-like, comes from dead matter? It seemed so, and yet why should it be?

At this juncture he heard his father walking on the floor above. And then he heard him at the head of the stairs. He was coming down, dragging his feet from step to step, and sliding his hand on the walnut railing. Millicent heard him and ran out into the hall, followed by Larkin. Seeing her brother in the dim light of the hall lamp, she cried:

"Oh, catch him! He'll fall and hurt himself."

Therewith Larkin sprang up the steps and caught his master's arm. "Steady, marster," he said, gently. "Be careful! Don't hurry!"

THE INNER LAW

But impatiently jerking from the negro's clutch, Gilbert half slid, half tumbled down the remainder of the steps and lunged out on the veranda. For a moment he stood glaring about him, then he stumbled down to the walk, where, snorting like a beast at bay, he turned and faced them.

"D-d-don't you dare touch me!" he cried, shaking his fist at Larkin. "I-I-I'll break every bone in your black hide, you stinking scamp!"

"Oh, go to him, brother!" Milicent pleaded. "Pacify him, humor him! He will do anything for you."

"You dry up, you meddlesome, scheming hussy!" Gilbert thundered. "I'm on to your tricks. You f-f-follow me and I'll have the law on you. I'll call the police and tell them w-what you're up to!"

He was turning toward the gate when Carter reached his side. "Where are you going, father?" he asked, greatly perturbed.

"To the b-b-bank," was the answer. "I want my m-money. We've got to have some to—to leave here on."

"But it is night; the bank is closed," Carter said, persuasively.

"I can get in. They got to let me have my money," Gilbert persisted, and he turned toward the gate.

"Leave him to me. I'll bring him home," Carter called back to Milicent, who was following close behind. "Stay here; he will be all right. I'll go with him."

"Yes, you come on," Gilbert said. "You can make them do the right thing."

They passed out at the gate, Carter holding his father's limp arm. The old man wore no hat, and his shaggy head was down so low that his chin rested on his breast. He was panting through his big nostrils like a tired beast of burden. His son noticed that the strings of his shoes were loose, and he tried to get Gilbert to let him tie them; but with an impatient snort the old man strode onward,

THE INNER LAW

sliding his feet over the pavement and stumbling where the stones were uneven. The people they met, mostly laborers going home from work, turned and stared wonderingly after them. At the end of the street they met several young ladies of Carter's acquaintance. They glanced at him and his charge sympathetically, bowed silently, dropped their eyes, and went on without looking back. He knew that they had heard the gossip and understood the situation. He felt sure that they were sorry for him, and a lump of appreciation rose in his throat. In all his life he had not dreamt that such humiliation as this could fall upon him. But his post was there. The bedraggled human wreck he was leading along was his father. If the whole world were looking on, he would not falter. He would bear his burden as a man should.

Finally they reached the business portion of the city, and in passing the door of a hotel Carter saw Charles Farnham about to get into a cab. He caught Carter's bewildered glance and stepped toward him, an expression of grave concern on his face.

"Can I help you?" he inquired. "Don't you want to use my cab?"

"Yes, if he will take it," Carter answered, desperately. "Father"—he shook the drooping old man's arm—"here's Charley; he wants us to ride home with him."

"Yes; come, get in," Farnham urged, tactfully. "I want to talk to you about our railroad."

"Oh yes, I know—the railroad!" Gilbert grinned up at him. "It's all right, eh? It's a whopping big deal, eh, Charley?"

"Yes, it is doing finely." Farnham caught his disengaged arm and drew him toward the cab. "Come, let's ride home and talk it over there. We are going to have that big meeting of capitalists next month, and Carter has to make a speech. Come on, now. We can't talk here."

THE INNER LAW

"Why not? I'm not afraid." Gilbert threw his full weight backward, and, grown suddenly suspicious, twisted his arm from Farnham's hold. "I'm going to get a gun, I am, and blow their dirty heads off. And you, too. What do you mean by holding me up like this?" He was now addressing the cabman. "I know you, you dirty whelp! You are in Henry's employ. You are trying to abduct me. You want to kill me."

"Leave him to me," Carter begged of his friend. "It is the only way."

"All right, but I wish I could help," Farnham said, regretfully, as he stepped back toward the hotel entrance.

Then, chuckling softly, and bursting into little fits of spasmodic laughter, Gilbert staggered onward, his son by his side. Soon they were at the bank. It was closed. Through the big plate-glass window a dim light could be seen burning in front of the steel-doored vaults. The old man caught the massive door-knob and shook it vigorously.

"Father, it is too late—it is night!" Carter said. "You know they don't keep open after dark. Come home with me. We will sleep together. I'm tired, and I know you are."

"Will you sleep with me? *Will* you?" Gilbert asked, as anxiously as a worried child, a thwarted flare in his eyes.

"Yes, yes. Come on!" A group was gathering. A man in the clothing of a laborer hurried forward excitedly.

"Anything wrong with the bank?" he panted. "They've got all my savings."

"No; my father is ill, that's all," Carter explained. "He doesn't know what he is doing. He has had a nervous attack."

"Oh, then the bank is all right!" the man said, in relief, and he went on his way, followed by some of the more considerate of the bystanders.

THE INNER LAW

Gilbert now was more tractable. He allowed his son to lead him across the street and thence slowly homeward. A few curious stragglers, mostly young boys, followed some distance behind, but they soon dropped back. The return was slow and filled with meaningless pauses. It was about ten o'clock when they finally entered the gate, made their way along the walk and up the veranda steps. Milicent stood in the darkened hallway, evidently undecided as to whether she should be seen or not. Larkin, who was on the lawn, crept forward, but Carter motioned him back.

"We are going up to bed," he said. "Leave us alone."

"Yes, and you stay out of my room," Gilbert threw back, angrily. "Carter and I know what we are doing."

Hearing this, Milicent slipped into the dark drawing-room and remained out of sight.

As father and son ascended the stairs the son heard the other chuckling, softly. "Huh!" he said. "That negro's been hired to spy on me, and to slug me in the dark; but you and I'll show them we are no fools."

Reaching his father's room, Carter turned up the light and persuaded his now blandly staring charge to let him undress him. Seated on the edge of the big, wide bed, Gilbert allowed him to take off his shoes and stockings. Then his trousers and other clothing were removed, and a clean, cool nightshirt was put on. It was a strange, weird experience to the sensitive, imaginative young man. He could not remember ever having seen his father's nude body, and the thin, wasted limbs, the hairy, yellowish skin filled him with combined dismay and pitying tenderness. He felt that he was performing the last duty of a son to a slowly dying parent. As he put the shirt over the tousled head his hands touched the old man's wrinkled neck, and an irresistible impulse came to him to caress the emaciated frame. As he buttoned the shirt at the neck, his eyes met those of the old man. They

THE INNER LAW

were filling with tears. Suddenly Gilbert put his arms about him and drew him tightly against his breast, which was shaking with sobs.

"My darling boy!" he said, huskily. "You love me—I know you do."

"Yes, father." And Carter stroked back the stiff, coarse hair from the dusty, perspiring brow. Then he got Gilbert to lie back on a pillow and, dampening a towel, he wiped the face, neck, and chest. "Now you will sleep soundly," he said, soothingly. "I'll stay here with you, but I'll lower the light."

"Don't leave me!" Gilbert pleaded, half sitting up in sudden anxiety.

"No, I'll be right here in the room," Carter assured him. "Now lie down."

It was after eleven o'clock. Gilbert lay with his eyes open, placidly staring through the dim light at his son. There was a soft step in the hall, a most cautious rap on the door. Carter went to it. Milicent was there, holding a glass with medicine in it.

"The doctor is down-stairs," she whispered. "He says he will not come up, since you are doing so well. He says if father is restless in the night to give him this. Are you going to sit up?"

"No. I'll lie down by him; he wishes it," Carter said. "He is getting quiet; we both may sleep a little."

"Oh, brother, isn't it terrible? Have you seen the afternoon paper?"

"No. What is in it?"

"Oh, it is a long article written very discreetly as to father's condition. It is spoken of as a nervous collapse, the serious illness of Atlanta's leading capitalist. There is a lot about you, too."

"About me?"

"Yes—your talent and promising future, and your being called home suddenly. You know the reporters exert

THE INNER LAW

themselves to make their articles readable, and you have admirers on all the papers. I'll show it to you in the morning."

He extended his hand and detained her at the top of the stairs. "Could you bring it to me here? I may get a chance to look at it through the night. The article did not say that I had accomplished any *fresh* work in the country, did it?"

"Yes, I think so, but I looked it over hurriedly; I can't say positively. I think they said you were at work at a long poem on some ambitious subject. But I can't be sure. I was so worried that I did not read it thoroughly."

"Well, bring it up. I'll wait for you here."

She tiptoed down the stairs, and he stood waiting in the dark. She was gone longer than seemed necessary. Going to the door of his father's room, he peered in, finding Gilbert lying just as he had left him, his eyes open and staring blankly. Carter decided then that something was detaining Milicent, and, rather displeased over the delay, he started down to get the paper, when he saw her coming with it in her hand. She gave it to him, and he returned to the patient's room. The gas was too low for him to read, and, seated by the bed, he wondered if turning the light up would disturb his father. He was afraid it might do so, and yet he was curious and even impatient to read what had been written about his work and himself. Presently he surmounted the difficulty by slipping from the room, without attracting his father's notice, and going into his own room across the hall. He turned up the low-burning gas and, standing by his bureau, he found the article in question and read it. Parts of it he read several times, the parts referring to himself. They were very complimentary, and pleased him as much as anything that had ever been printed about him. The whole South, the paper said, was justly proud of her literary son, and would sympathize with him in the keen

THE INNER LAW

pain that must now rest on a young man of such refined and exalted nature. Great work was confidently expected of him in the near future, and even the trying experience he was now encountering would but serve to ripen the budding genius and lyric power that he undoubtedly possessed.

Carter folded the paper and put it into his coat pocket. A warm glow suffused him from head to foot. After all, he was not an ordinary, humdrum being, he told himself as he moved softly back to his father's room and again seated himself by the bed. Gilbert looked at him and smiled as a child might, and he rose and went to him, taking the medicine Milicent had brought.

"I think you'd better drink this," he said. "You seem restless, and it will make you sleep."

Raising himself on his elbow, Gilbert obeyed, and then with a little sigh reclined again. All at once a veritable storm of shame swept over the son. Was it possible that he had allowed himself to enjoy mere compliments such as he had been reading while actually facing the most terrible of disasters?

He sat down in the chair, watching the pale face on the pillow and reflecting poignantly on himself. Gilbert had closed his eyes. In a moment he was sleeping soundly. Carter rested his elbows on his knees, holding his head between his hands, wondering, wondering now as to his own complexity, his own shallowness.

Suddenly he thought of his visit to the country, next into his mind came that first meeting with Lydia in the library, then other meetings, and finally that last afternoon in the cabin, and with that he found himself burning with passionate memories—memories which for the moment held no regrets. He raised his head and looked at the form on the bed. The yellow face was that of a corpse—the corpse of his loved father, and yet even at a moment like that he was unable to quench the fleshly

THE INNER LAW

fires within him. His father would die soon—had the doctor not said so? He would leave him a great fortune, and with that fortune he could do as he liked. He could live where he wished and satisfy every desire. The world would marvel at the creations of his pen. The life stretching out before him would be a perfect one.

The clock had struck twelve. He must lie down and rest. He took off his clothing and reclined beside his father, stretching out his plump, rosy limbs beside the emaciated ones. He rested his young, shaven face close to the old face that was covered with grizzled beard and splotched with the brown marks of encroaching death.

Roused by the motion of the bed, Gilbert turned on his side and stared into the eyes of his son. He sighed contentedly, smiled, slid his moist hand down by his side into Carter's, and pressed his fingers. Carter returned the pressure, and as he did so that incongruous, almost maternal, feeling of pity and tenderness swept over him again. He lay still, almost holding his breath, his fingers clinging to his father's. Suddenly he thought of Lydia, of how he had overpowered her and was now shocked at the realization of his lost honor. He was inclined to pray, but what was there to pray about? Vaguely he felt that he needed help from outside himself, from the great Principle of Good which he had called God, but he was not now ready to ask for it. Only the clean could approach infinite cleanliness, and he was unclean. Yes, he was unclean, and he had been despicably weak. His uncle had duly warned him of the inborn family failing, but the warning had been unheeded. He felt the fingers of his father relaxing. Gilbert was asleep; but his son lay awake the greater part of the night.

CHAPTER XIII

THE arrangements were completed for the removal of the demented man to the sanitarium at Cincinnati. The chief fear that Carter had was that as the hour for leaving approached Gilbert might refuse to go, and the use of force in any form seemed out of the question. However, as Larkin was packing the old man's trunk Gilbert stood near and showed signs of interest. Once while this was going on he turned to his son and, laying his hand on his shoulder, whispered, cautiously:

"Don't let them know where we are going. It is none of their business. We've got to give them the slip."

Overhearing this, Milicent nodded knowingly to her brother and quietly left the room.

"I'm glad she is gone," Gilbert said, slyly, with an uncanny grimace. "She thinks she can fool me. But I am on to her. She was asking me yesterday if I'd paid up my life-insurance. She thinks I'm going to die."

That evening, when Larkin brought the carriage to the door and took down the hand-bags, Gilbert went about shaking hands with the servants almost with the glee of a happy child. He even submitted to a kiss from Milicent, seeming to have forgotten his suspicions against her. Henry was not there. He had not been at home all that day.

When the moment for leaving came Carter led his father down to the carriage and got in beside him. He gave the order to Larkin and they drove away rapidly. The thought went hurtling through the young poet's

THE INNER LAW

brain that his father was leaving his home for ever, and with that a great depression came over him. How horrible to die like that! How horrible to linger in life like a whimsical child in the tottering form of an old man surrounded by the useless things your own life-energy had created! Carter felt physically weak. He had scarcely eaten enough to sustain him, so great had been the strain on his mind, but he told himself that once the responsibility of his father's care was off his shoulders he would be himself again. Through the lighted streets the carriage rolled. Gilbert was looking about curiously, and a great fear came to Carter that he might at any moment change his mood and refuse to go. But the train was reached without halt or delay. They arrived, as was their intention, only a few minutes before leaving-time, and found the drawing-room in the Pullman ready for them. Gilbert allowed himself to be conducted to it, vaguely staring here and there as if he scarcely understood what it was all about. When the train started he sprang up and ran to a window, a look of alarm on his face. But Carter touched him on the arm and drew him down to a seat.

"Where are we going?" Gilbert questioned.

"To Cincinnati," Carter answered.

"To Cincinnati? Wh-what for?" was the groping question.

"Because that is best," the son answered, noticing that some of the passengers were looking and listening in surprise.

"But I want to see Charley Farnham about the railroad deal," Gilbert began, rebelliously. "I want to go to the bank, too, and attend to some of my business. Let's get off."

Dismay filled the young man. How was he to control such an irrational creature before strangers, who would certainly object to such a questionable fellow-passenger?

THE INNER LAW

Gilbert was now standing in the drawing-room doorway. "I want to see Charley, I say. Stop the train!"

"Farnham is to meet us in Cincinnati in the morning," Carter bethought himself to say, though he said it tremulously and with his heart in his tight throat.

"Oh, that's it, eh?"

"Yes, he will be there; now come sit down. We are going to bed pretty soon."

"That's good," Gilbert chuckled as he turned back to his seat. "Charley's all right, eh? A regular wheel-horse?"

"Yes, he's all right. He is managing everything finely." Carter started to close the drawing-room door, seeing that some of the passengers were peering curiously at them; but Gilbert sprang up again, fiercely threw out his hand, and stopped him.

"Don't shut me up here! Don't, I tell you!" he fairly screamed. "I want air!"

There was nothing else to do but to humor him, and, terrified by the situation, Carter allowed him to stand in the doorway, rocking to and fro. Presently Carter got him to sit down on the sofa, but the noise of the wheels, the hurried movements of the passengers, conductor, and porters seemed to have unduly excited the old man. He was constantly jumping up and asking unimportant questions of any one who happened to pass. He went through the entire car, smiling and bowing suavely to the passengers, some of whom stared coldly and shrank back into their seats in alarm. Carter caught himself looking at them all appealingly, trying to make his eyes plead his cause. There was no pride left in him now. He was at the mercy of strangers, and hoped they would see his plight and bear with him, even aid him. Finally he got his father back to the drawing-room; but Gilbert stoutly refused to be undressed for bed. Carter succeeded in taking off his shoes and coat and vest, but

THE INNER LAW

that was all. Carter decided not to undress himself, for there was no knowing what whim might come to the old man in the night. Most of the berths in the car were being made ready when Gilbert rose and insisted on starting down the aisle again. He had got half-way through when the conductor, followed by a porter, met him. The conductor frowned.

"I'm sorry," he said to Carter, who was holding his father's arm, "but this really can't go on. I've got some nervous women aboard, and they are objecting. They have paid their fare and have their rights."

"Yes, of course," Carter replied. "I'm doing the best I can."

"I see you are, and I'm sorry for you," the conductor returned; "but I have my duty to perform. The company looks to me for the comfort of my passengers, and complaints go against me."

Aided by a genial negro porter, Carter succeeded in getting the old man back to his berth. From that moment till daybreak was a continuous nightmare to Carter. Gilbert laughed aloud. He wept. He whined. He whimpered. He sang snatches of songs. Finally, in sheer exhaustion, he fell asleep; but there was no sleep for his son. With his hands locked between his knees Carter sat watching the lightly sleeping man. He wondered if any human being had ever suffered quite as he was suffering. He was so morbidly constituted that he could all but feel his father's disease gnawing like insects into his own brain. He remembered that the doctor had said that paresis was not hereditary, but would a doctor tell the truth to a son of such a patient? Might he not even now be falling a victim to the grim horror? For an hour or more he allowed these terrible broodings to rest on him, unaware that they were due to his nervous and physical exhaustion.

The gray light of morning was creeping in at the sides

THE INNER LAW

of the closely drawn curtains. A porter was going through the car extinguishing the dim overhead lights. Looking along the aisle, Carter saw that none of the passengers were up. He motioned to the negro, and when the man approached he whispered:

"Are we on time?"

"Yes, boss," the negro returned. "It is five now; we'll be in the city by seven."

Gilbert slept on. Every moment thus passed was valued by his son. The asylum to which they were going seemed the most desired goal of his whole life. Unspeakable horrors and further humiliation could happen at any moment. Gilbert might wake in the mood of a demon enraged by restraint. The lives of the passengers might be in danger. A panic in the car might ensue. The demented man might have to be beaten, bound, and thrust from the train. Was ever a more foolish journey undertaken?

But, as if in answer to an unuttered prayer, Gilbert slept on. The warm sunlight of another hot day was streaming into the car. The curtains at all the berths were being removed. The passengers, only partly clad, were going to and from the dressing-rooms, jostling against the seats. Carter felt the fine dust of travel on his face and hands, and saw it on his father's cheeks and brow, but was afraid to leave his post. However, just before reaching their destination he managed to get away and hastily made his toilet. Then with a dampened towel he returned and wiped his father's face, thus waking him. To his great relief Gilbert was placid and even pleased. From the window he watched the houses of the suburb through which the train was passing, and quite eagerly helped his son repack their bags.

"Where's Farnham going to be?" he asked.

"At a hotel," Carter replied, helplessly. "We have to take a carriage to it. It is a little way out of town."

THE INNER LAW

Gilbert chuckled and rubbed his hands together. "Great ch-ch-chap, that boy! He'll help us get away from those sneaking devils, won't he?"

"Yes, he'll help us." The train had stopped and the porter had taken their bags out. "Come on, now; let's go."

"What t-t-town is it?"

"Cincinnati. You know we are to meet Farnham here to see about the railroad? The driver will take us to him."

"But I'm hungry and I want m-m-my coffee."

"Then we'll get something at a restaurant outside."

"All right, then; let's hurry. We are giving them the slip, eh?"

"Yes. Come on."

As they were descending to the ground Carter saw a group of four or five passengers at the steps. Some of them glared at him resentfully, and as he walked on, holding his father's arm, he heard an elderly woman say: "It is an outrage. I didn't sleep a wink. He was making a noise all night. I was afraid he'd cut our throats. Just think of it—only a curtain between us and a raving maniac!"

There was a café across the street with some food displayed in a window, and Gilbert strode hastily toward it. Entering the dining-room, Carter selected a small table in a corner, and they took seats at it. Gilbert wore his hat, and for a moment protested against its removal. A negro waiter came to take their order, wondering over the old man's conduct.

"Bring us eggs and bacon and coffee," Carter said. "We are going to the country at once. Will you have a carriage at the door?"

"Yes. There is one at the stand around the corner," the negro answered. "It will be ready for you, sir."

Gilbert now sat idly twirling his thumbs over his folded

THE INNER LAW

napkin. A puzzled expression was on his face, as if he were trying to recall something which vaguely haunted his memory. He glanced out at the window and p at the roofs of the tall buildings with the groping curiosity of a child awaking amid new surroundings.

"W-w-where are we?" he suddenly asked, his lip trembling piteously. "I don't know this street or—or those houses."

Carter made no reply, for the waiter was bringing the breakfast, which completely held his father's attention. With quivering hands Gilbert poured out his coffee, and began to drink it when it was so hot that it burnt his lips. This made him furious, and, stamping his foot, he swore at the waiter, who smiled at Carter as if he understood and sympathized. Gilbert began to eat, ignoring his knife and fork and putting his food into his mouth with his fingers. Carter ate, but with little appetite, for his anguish seemed to have affected his whole physical organism. Through the window he saw a carriage drive up to the door, and, glancing at the waiter, he said:

"Please put our bags in, and tell the driver we'll be right out."

Breakfast over, Gilbert followed his son to the carriage. He had taken a handful of toothpicks from the table and was nervously chewing some of them. At the open door he suddenly drew back and stared up and down the street, a hint of rebellion in his manner.

Carter touched his arm and said: "Get in; let's go."

"Where t-t-to?" Gilbert's brow was wrinkled in perplexity.

"To Farnham's hotel. He's waiting for us."

"Oh, he is! Well, he's all right. He's our friend, anyway, you may bet your boots on th-th-that."

Gilbert bowed his head and got into the carriage. In a low tone Carter gave the address of the sanitarium.

THE INNER LAW

The driver nodded significantly. "All right. I know the place. I've been there many a time."

Carter was about to get in when his father stopped him by trying to get out.

"What's this for?" he demanded, one foot already out.

"It's a nice ride, sir—mighty nice," the driver said, with a pacific smile. "It's through the woods all the way—cool, shady, and nice in hot weather like this."

"We are going to meet Farnham," Carter said, desperately. "He is waiting for us."

"Oh y-y-yes, Farnham!" Gilbert sank back in the carriage, and his son got in and closed the door.

The cool morning air swept in at the window as the vehicle moved swiftly along, and the distraught young man began to feel hopeful. His responsibility would soon be over, he told himself, and alluring pictures of what he would do when he was free once more began to flit through his mind. There was a book he wanted to see, and it was likely that it could be found in the public library of the city. The magazines for the month were just out, and he wanted to see if a poem he had sold to one of them had been published. He liked the poem very much, and he wanted his friends to see it in print. He wondered if the editor would have it illustrated and give it the full page it deserved.

They were soon in the country. Trees dropped their thick branches over the narrow road. There were little hills to ascend and shady vales to pass through. The motion of the carriage had a sedative effect on the old man. Gradually his head sank back on his son's arm; he closed his eyes and slept. Again that odd, inexpressible tumult of love and tenderness captured the heart of the poet. But for the fear of waking the sleeper he would have caressed the wrinkled face and sunken cheeks. Surely this love of which he had become conscious only

THE INNER LAW

since his father's illness was a queer thing! Was it because a father in his weakness was being fathered by his child, or was there even a deeper psychic meaning behind it? All at once the carriage lurched sharply; Gilbert's inert head rocked, and his cheek came in contact with that of his son and lodged there. Under a yearning impulse, Carter stroked the opposite cheek, the bristling beard rasping his hand and producing a strange, almost exquisite thrill. Something impelled him further—something too deep down within him to be fathomed—something, perhaps, subconsciously linked with the childhood period when he had sat upon that man's knee and leaned against a breast the world considered sordid, but which was not wholly so. He turned his face and kissed the pale, cool brow. Then he sat still, willingly supporting the rough cheek with his own.

The minutes passed. Thoughts came into his mind which were so sadly tender in character that his throat tightened with tense emotion. He thought of his dead mother, of her long patience with her preoccupied husband, and her love for him. He thought of his uncle and his unconquerable sorrow and moody manner. He thought of the old servant-woman at the farm, Mrs. Romley, and then he thought of Lydia—Lydia, pure, beautiful, innocent; Lydia and her reluctant kisses and slow confessions of love. The carriage jostled again, the clammy cheek shook his own, and it was as if he were waking from a sensuous dream to a situation too horrible to be conceived. The cheek of the dying man might as well be that of a corpse, the corpse of the man who had given him life, and yet at such a moment he had been actually gloating over the first great sin of his life—a sin he had once thought he could never commit. He gently pushed his father's head from him, staring at the closed lids as if for advice. He recalled his uncle's talk that night in the summer-house; he recalled how absurd it had

THE INNER LAW

seemed that the old man should have fears of him, who at the time was living on such an ideal plane.

"My God! my God! What am I?" he said, all but aloud. His father opened his eyes drowsily and stared at him; the eyes had a bloodshot look and seemed full of reproach. They seemed to say: "Why did you go and do as I did, as my brother did, as Henry did? You were warned in time. You could see what we had come to, all three of us. Take the advice of a dying man and save your soul. There is a hell, but it isn't the old-fashioned, material fire. It is the consuming flames of the spirit. The worm that never dies is the conscience, and it will writhe on the coals of infinite justice till it purifies itself."

CHAPTER XIV

THE pace of the horses had slackened. Looking out, Carter saw that they were at the big gate of the asylum grounds. A man on guard within unlocked it, and the gate swung open. Just ahead of them stood a great four-story white building with a long veranda in front and balconies above. The grounds were shaded by many trees, and the grass of the lawn was well cared for. Under the trees were seats where the most tractable of the inmates sat. Some of them looked up as the carriage passed, while others sat staring blankly at the ground.

The stopping of the horses at the door roused Gilbert. He looked about him in a perplexed way and asked:

"Is this th-th-the hotel?"

"Yes, this is the place," answered his son.

"And Char-Charley, where is the boy?"

"We'll have to inquire," Carter said, evasively. "Let's go inside."

Gilbert permitted himself to be helped from the carriage and up the steps. A young man in livery met them at the door, bowing perfunctorily.

"Walk into the parlor," he said to Carter. "The doctor will be right in."

"The doc-doctor—did he say doctor?" Gilbert stutted, as he shuffled along to the parlor door.

"He means the proprietor," his son said.

"But Char-Charley, where is he? You said he would meet us here."

THE INNER LAW

"We'll ask for him presently," Carter said, soothingly. They took seats in the big parlor with its glaring green carpet, and chairs upholstered in flowered satin. A piano stood in one corner, a marble-topped table in the center of the room holding a plush-covered album for photographs. On the plain white walls were some large steel-engravings in walnut frames.

A moment later Dr. Hamilton came in. He was a man of sixty years of age, of medium height, and stockily built. His eyes were dark, his short, full beard and hair were black, with faint touches of gray above the ears.

"Ah, this is Mr. Crofton, I'm sure," he said, advancing to Gilbert, his hand extended

Gilbert took the hand reluctantly, staring in an impatient, bewildered way into the broad, strong face.

"Charley Farnham. I want to see him—Far-Farnham, the railroad president," Gilbert stammered.

"Oh yes, yes; I see!" the doctor smiled at Carter knowingly as he shook hands with him. "He is around somewhere; we'll look him up. But you must go up to your room first"—he turned back to the patient—"you've had a hard trip in such hot weather, and must wash the dust off and lie down and rest. Come this way."

He took Gilbert's arm and led him out into the foyer and to an elevator.

"I'll go up with him and then come back to you," he whispered to Carter. "Please wait in the parlor."

The elevator closed on him and Gilbert, who was staring perplexedly about him.

Carter sat alone in the parlor, conscious of inexpressible relief in having the responsibility of his charge taken from him. After half an hour had passed he heard the elevator door open, and Dr. Hamilton came in. He smiled as he sat down and began to break the tip from a cigar with his thumb-nail.

THE INNER LAW

"I presume, from Dr. Lloyd's letter, that he has already informed you of the gravity of your father's condition?"

Carter nodded; and the doctor went on:

"I am sorry to have to tell you, after the examination I have just made, that your father's condition is even worse than I expected. From the symptoms the disease is progressing very rapidly. He may at any moment have a more severe attack than he has had, and he may remain as he is for a month or more. At any rate, it is well for him to be here, and I assure you that he shall have the best attention. I shall examine him again tomorrow. May I ask if you wish to return to Atlanta at once?"

"I thought I'd stay here awhile," Carter answered; "that is, if you—"

"Oh, we have plenty of room for visitors!" Dr. Hamilton broke in; "but I think if I were in your place, Mr. Crofton, I'd stay in town. I can see by looking at you"—here the doctor took his wrist and tested the pulse—"that you are somewhat unstrung yourself, which, of course, is due to sympathy, and in your condition I think the surroundings here would not be best. I can keep in touch with you by the 'phone and inform you of any change in your father's condition."

"Yes, I think you are right," Carter returned. "I'll go to a hotel in town, and come out every day. The carriage is waiting and I will go back in it. How does my father take the—the restraint?"

"Oh, as well as we could expect. He has been a man of strong will, and he has not lost it all, low as he is. But don't worry. Long experience has taught us the best way to handle such patients. Now take my advice and think as little of this matter as possible. Go about and amuse yourself in town. You are of a highly nervous type and need diversion—now especially. Lloyd writes

THE INNER LAW

me that you are a poet. I haven't had the pleasure of reading any of your work. In fact, I read nothing at all now except the newspapers. I haven't time. I'm busy night and day. But you must take care of yourself and throw all this off as much as possible. Don't brood over it. It won't do you a bit of good. Worrying over business has had much to do with your father's breakdown. Don't follow in his footsteps."

CHAPTER XV

HOW differently the world appeared as Carter drove back to the city! The light of the afternoon sun seemed to hold a vague promise of infinite hope and peace. The most awful ordeal he had ever met was over. He had done his duty. He was sure that many young men would have shirked the thing he had undertaken and accomplished. His heart warmed even toward the carriage driver, whom he intended to tip liberally. He was sure the man might look upon him with more interest if he knew that he was not only the son of a rich man, but that he was a poet whose lyrics a considerable part of the world was reading with delight. Surely the fellow did not often come into contact with a real poet. It was quite likely that he had never served one, and if he were informed of this fact in regard to his present passenger it might please him. He might have a wife and children at home, and close friends to whom he would relate the circumstances with natural pride.

Arriving at the hotel, he paid the driver, and added a tip that surprised the fellow and caused him to bow profusely.

"You'll be going out again, I guess," the man said, eagerly. "I'll be on the lookout for you."

"Yes, I'll go out every day for a while, I think," Carter returned. "I'll be busy in town part of the time. I have a lot of writing to do. That is my profession. I am a poet."

"A poet," the driver said, absent-mindedly, as he

THE INNER LAW

glanced toward his horses. "Well, I hope I gave you satisfaction, sir. I understand my work. I can drive fast or slow, just as you see fit. Just ask anybody about town if they know Jack Larrigan. They all know me and call me just 'Jack.' I know high and low—lawyers, doctors, politicians, gamblers, barkeepers, and the chief of the police. I had the mayor and his family in my rig only yesterday, and Senator Gibbs wires me to meet him at the station every time he comes home from Washington."

"Yes, yes; I see," said the poet, vaguely crestfallen. "Well, I'll look you up, Jack." And as he followed a porter into the foyer of the great hotel he was conscious of a sort of chagrin which was hard to define. Without knowing it, the driver had rebuked him.

At the desk, behind which stood several dapper clerks, he registered and secured the best chamber with a private bath and sitting-room that was available, feeling gratified by the clerk's suddenly lifted brows and obsequious manner.

"Do you wish to go up now, Mr. Crofton?" he asked, reaching for a key.

"Yes," Carter answered.

Even the negro porter, who was conducting him to the elevator, was obviously influenced by the number of the choice suite which the clerk had called out, for Carter heard him whisper it to one of his fellows as they passed a row of bell-boys seated against a wall.

"After all," Carter reflected, as he lay in the tub of the sumptuous bath-room, "I can't help matters, and I ought to take the doctor's advice and not worry."

He dried himself, and with a newspaper and cigar lay down on the lounge in his sitting-room, conscious of a sense of vast restfulness and actual content. He was hungry, now that his anxiety was over, and about seven o'clock he got up and dressed for dinner. He was glad that he had brought his evening clothes, for he had al-

THE INNER LAW

ways thought that men in business dress in fashionable cafés appeared out of place, uncouth and unaccustomed to the usages of the best society.

As he went into the great dining-room, which was lighted from crystal chandeliers, the gay scene charmed his fancy. At the far end there was an orchestra in a balcony decorated with palms, and they were playing a selection from an opera which he admired. He was inspired by the air, and his bouyant step, as he followed the head waiter to a small table on one side of the room, was sympathetically conformed to it. There were many diners of both sexes in the room, and all were in evening dress. After he had given his order he sent for an afternoon paper, and while he was waiting for his dinner to be brought he convinced himself that he was reading the news, while, in fact, he scarcely took in a line of the paper's contents. The personal column, however, set him to thinking that, since the reporters of daily journals often looked over the registers of the leading hotels, they might see his name and make note of his arrival as a man of importance. Indeed, they might even seek to interview him on the subject of current literature, as an Atlanta paper had once done. That interview had been a tribute to his genius, and he had mailed many copies of it to his friends, and had preserved it in a well-worn scrap-book.

At a table close to his own sat a family group, a middle-aged man and woman with three young ladies, evidently their daughters. The youngest and tallest of the three girls was strikingly pretty. He told himself that she was a veritable human flower, a regal white rose. He was sure she loved poetry. He had met many such, and they, all of them, had liked to have him read his poems to them. She sat very erect, her long lashes lowered. Her hands were delicate and tapering, her abundant brown hair fell back in artistic waves from her fine white brow, and was

THE INNER LAW

fastened in a graceful knot at the back. He stared at her covertly from behind his paper. He was sure that she had noticed him. How romantic it would be, he thought, if by some chance they should meet through some common acquaintance who happened to come along! He smiled to himself as he imagined her surprise at being informed that her admirer was none other than Carter Crofton, of whose rare gift so much was being said, and who, for the sake of his work, had become something of a recluse, though not quite the woman-hater as had been stated. However, she was taking no further notice of him now, for her parents and sisters were rising from the table and leaving the room. His eyes followed her as she walked toward the door. She really had the slow awkwardness of an overgrown school-girl, but this was not apparent to him. In fact, he was sure she danced divinely and had a mind worth knowing. He sighed, for it struck him that they would perhaps never meet, never in the great wide world.

When his dinner was over he went into the foyer, and thence into a smoking-room. Finding a card of amusements, he looked it over. The plays at the theaters did not appeal to his fancy, so he decided that he would go to a certain famous beer-garden on "The Heights." He had heard some of his college friends speak of the resort as well worth a visit. Wearing his silk top-hat and stylish gray overcoat, and smoking a fragrant cigar, he went outside and had an attendant call a cab for him.

As the cab bore him along a vast content rested on him. It was a glorious thing to be young, wealthy, and gifted; and those things had not been sought by him; they had come to him as a birthright. His father was dying, but Gilbert Crofton was old; all men have to die when their time comes, and their children ought not to be sad over the inevitable—and yet, and yet the broken man might even now be asking for him, wondering why he was not

THE INNER LAW

there, weeping, pleading, declaring that a trick had been played on him by his enemies—perhaps now suspecting that his favorite son had also turned against him. Perhaps Gilbert had rebelled against restraint, necessary force had been used and bodily pain inflicted. If so it would never be known, for, of course, such establishments had their private methods. A thrill of horror accompanied by a wave of incongruous grief passed over him. Ah, the helpless old man now realized that he was deserted, a prisoner among strangers! Perhaps sufficient reason remained to make the realization to such a man as Gilbert Crofton terrible in the extreme.

The cab was putting him down at the door of the beer-garden. Lively music came from the crowded place. His gloom was lifting. Why should he worry? he asked himself. That would do no one any good. On a platform a group of Tyrolian singers in peasant dress were yodeling and dancing merrily. Carter admired the form of one of the young women very much, and as he took a seat at a table quite near the platform he looked up at her, smiled patronizingly, and clapped his hands approvingly. She may have been the faithful wife of the singer next to her, and yet she smiled back with appreciation, for the rich dress and youthful face of her admirer indicated that he was perhaps a college student who belonged to a privileged class in the eyes of many vaudeville performers. An idea for an Alpine poem flashed into his mind. He was sure he already had a good first line and a fine title. He must not forget it, and, taking a pencil from his pocket, he made a note on the margin of the program. Then he ordered beer of the man who was removing the empty glasses and wiping the damp table. When the beer came he raised his glass and, catching the singer's eye, playfully indicated that he was drinking her health. She bowed, smiled, and made a pretty feint of responding by raising her cupped hand to her painted lips. Some of the

THE INNER LAW

audience noticed the little flirtation and smiled good-naturedly. This pleased our poet, for he felt quite the experienced man of the world to-night, and was sure his easy manner and dress indicated it. He began to wonder what his income would be when his father was dead. He tried to put it from his mind as unworthy of consideration at such a time, but it persisted. It would be handsome; he knew that from what Farnham had said about the railroad. Then he began to dream of the life before him. He would live in the best fashion, have the best things money could buy. He would pass most of his time in Europe. All the best minds had lived and worked in that congenial atmosphere, and why should not he do so? He would write only when he felt truly inspired and show the world that it was not necessary for a genius to occupy an attic to be at his best.

A rouged woman in a flashy dress was smiling at him from a table near by. Indifferently he nodded and returned the smile. She inclined her head to the vacant chair on her right and winked, thus inviting him to join her; but with a reluctant smile he shook his head and directed his attention to the performers. Such a common creature was not for him, he said to himself. Then his thoughts drifted into a more serious channel. Perhaps she was once an innocent girl who had been led astray by some idle trifter, and had finally sunk to this manner of earning a living. Why had he not thought of it before? What, after all, was to become of Lydia—beautiful, trusting, innocent child of the mountains? What was to prevent her from going the way of all such desperate creatures? All at once the life and joy went out of the gay scene around him. The music had lost its charm. He sat with his glance on his dead cigar, his second glass of beer untouched. Something must be done, but what? Marriage was the only honorable thing for some men, but that was out of the question in his case, for he was

THE INNER LAW

a Crofton, a member of an old family, a man of wealth, a genius. The Croftons all along had done as he had done. How could he be expected to act differently when the tendency was inborn and not to be eradicated? In fact, it would be harder for him to marry under such circumstances than it would have been for Henry, for instance, for the world had already taken notice of him, and social as well as mental triumphs were expected of him. No, no; marriage to such a girl, beautiful and true as she was, was absurd, but he would have plenty of money before long and she should be amply provided for. Perhaps he might take her with him abroad. It might be managed secretly. He could give her the prettiest, most costly things to wear. He could show her the great foreign world. She would be grateful; she would be happy; she would adore him; they could be together whenever it was convenient. Yes, yes, that must be done. It was a dazzling solution of the miserable problem. And he loved her—he loved her.

He got up and started out. He was now burning with the passionate memories of their last meeting. The women who sat alone at various tables, and who glanced at him seductively as he passed, were unnoticed. Lydia, Lydia! no king could have a more beautiful mistress. He would teach her all needed things, and, above all, to understand him. After all, what was wrong about it? Was he not more European by nature than American? And what European of his rank and fortune would let a thing like that mar his happiness?

CHAPTER XVI

THE next day was Sunday. Carter slept till ten o'clock, and then arose and took his bath. An unaccountable feeling of morbid depression was on him, and as he bathed he rubbed his skin vigorously to give his blood better circulation. Before dressing he took his usual exercises by swinging his arms about and bending his body to and fro. But the exercise did not seem to help him into a happier mood, and presently he became aware of the cause of this. It was because he had to visit the asylum. He might not be permitted to see his father, but he would have to see the grim, accusing place of his confinement and confer with its manager. How much more welcome death would be, since death had to come so soon, anyway, than this prolonged torture of those who loved the doomed man!

There was a telephone in his sitting-room, and, seeing it, Carter suddenly decided to call up Dr. Hamilton. Perhaps he would find that it was not necessary for him to go out that day, and certainly to-morrow would suit him better.

The connection was made and he was soon speaking to Dr. Hamilton.

"Yes, yes, I understand," came over the wire. "I have just seen your father. He is doing as well as I could expect. You, of course, know that he is a difficult patient to control, but every possible thing is being done that can be done."

"I was wondering, doctor, if there would be any use

THE INNER LAW

in my coming out to-day," Carter returned. "I am still a little tired from my trip and loss of sleep."

"None in the world, Mr. Crofton," the answer came quickly. "In fact, if you came to-day I should not let you see your father, for it would not be advisable now. To-morrow I think you may see him, but it is better for him to be alone to-day. I assure you you have no cause for worry at present, and if there is any change for the worse I'll telephone you at once."

"Thank you. Very well, I'll wait till to-morrow," said Carter, and as he hung up the receiver he was conscious of a sense of boundless relief. Now he could be himself and spend the day as he liked. Under a little glow of anticipation he finished dressing. He could now sit over his breakfast with the morning paper and enjoy it as he would also enjoy his cigar in the smoking-room afterward.

It was eleven o'clock when his breakfast was over and he went out into the streets for a stroll. Why was he so constantly thinking, in connection with his father's approaching end, of the share of the estate which would fall to him? He fairly shuddered under the weight of self-accusation, and yet he could not free himself from the thought. He recalled Gilbert's chief holdings one by one, and a comforting charm hovered over each. There were the Western mining stocks which were constantly advancing in value; the investments in Southern iron-ore lands and iron-furnaces; the cotton-mills; the banking shares; the United States bonds; the private loans, large and small, which were well secured by real estate and good collateral. One-third of all this was to be his own, and in addition there was the special gift from his father of the interest in Farnham's railroad, which his friend had assured him would be a fortune in itself. Surely, surely he was a lucky man, and yet something was wrong somewhere, else why this constant, haunting depression? Was it grief? Was it the shock of his father's

THE INNER LAW

breakdown? Was it remorse? He could not answer. He tried to revive the pleasure the anticipation of his coming wealth often brought to him, but it was in vain. Yes, something was wrong—decidedly wrong.

As he strolled aimlessly along the streets he noticed groups of persons, old and young, in their best attire, going to the various churches. He heard a bell ringing in the tower of an old-fashioned edifice near by, and for no special reason he went toward it.

Deep down within him lay a certain respect for religious observances. He recalled, with a touch of sadness, how punctual his mother had been in her attendance at the Presbyterian service. Milicent, too, was religious, in a formal way; but the years spent at a Unitarian college among friends who were free-thinkers had quite deprived him of the orthodox faith. He no longer believed the simple biblical stories he had been taught in childhood. He told himself that he was a philosopher, but of the idealistic rather than the materialistic school. It was plain to him that all true poets were mystics, and if he had any religion it was that of Emerson, Tennyson, and Browning.

He went into the vestibule of the church, paused at the door, and looked in. The congregation was filing in and taking seats. A polite usher offered to direct him to a front pew, but he entered one close to the door, thinking that he might more easily withdraw if he felt so inclined. He was strongly impressed by the contented-looking family groups which came in and went to their pews. There were mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, and the sight of them there together, the young bearing resemblances to the old, struck him as being eminently beautiful, but, so far as he was concerned, vaguely inadequate.

Thereupon his morbidness descended upon him even more heavily. Family life was certainly good and essential. The fact that his own home had been so inhar-

THE INNER LAW

monious made him more keenly appreciate harmony in other homes. He caught himself looking at some of the sons in the family groups. They appeared to be clean, pure-minded young men. There certainly could be no such complex storm raging in their breasts as was then raging in his. He was sure—his experience with young men of Puritan descent made him sure—that not one of those in the pews now holding the hymn-books for their sisters or mothers could ever descend to the unconventional life abroad which he had planned to live with Lydia as an escape from the consequences of the wrong he had done.

After all, how could he do it? What would be the final end of it all? Who would be the father of the possible children of such a nameless union? How could he marry the sort of woman he had dreamed of as his wife if he were then living with and actually loving the partner of his first great sin?

The organ was being played. The choir rose and began to sing; the music was good, but it made him all the more restless—all the more wretched. Rising, he left the church. Lydia, Lydia, poor stranded, misused, wrecked creature! Something must be done, but what? He was to blame; yes, yes, he was to blame, wholly to blame. She had pleaded with him like a beautiful, cowering slave sensing disaster, and yet in the hot tumult of his passion he had overpowered her and shown her that the will—the desire of a Crofton would not be thwarted, once it had reached the point of bestial demand.

He spent the remainder of that day in loneliness save for the companionship of unwelcome reflections. He walked much, and when he returned to his hotel at night he was greatly fatigued.

On the table in his sitting-room he found the magazines he had ordered. Almost listlessly he turned the leaves. The discovery that his own expected poem had not yet appeared did not disappoint him so much as had

THE INNER LAW

been the case the month previous, and the poems by other authors seemed flat and purposeless. Something was wrong with him. Was he actually losing all vital interest in his art?

A horrible fear attacked him. He remembered having read that some great authority had said that no writer could produce good, lasting, uplifting work who was himself immoral. He tried to laugh at the idea and recalled name after name, especially among the French, English, and German poets whose private lives contradicted the statement, but still the idea clung to him. Perhaps there were different spiritual laws for different men and different countries. This must be true, or he would not be so depressed over an act that many other poets would scarcely think about a moment. Yes, it was because he was an American, but he would not remain in America. He would live where men were free, and he would be free. He was a genius, and genius made its own laws.

He went to bed and tried to sleep, but the night was warm and he tossed about restlessly. Suddenly the memory of his father's distraught face, as he looked at him through the iron lattice of the elevator at the asylum, returned to him. A lump of emotion pained his throat. Tears came into his eyes and fell upon his pillow. He loved that man. It was queer, but he loved his father in his infantile helplessness more than he had ever loved any one else on earth. Perhaps it was because the old man had believed in him so thoroughly and trusted him even in the mental darkness that was on him.

After hours of such musings as these he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVII

THE next morning he had his breakfast in his room, telling himself that it was the French custom and a delightful, luxurious one, owing to its privacy and to the fact that it was pleasanter to go through the ordeal of dressing after one had drunk one's coffee, smoked, and read the papers.

He ordered a carriage, and it was at the entrance when he went down at ten o'clock. The drive was an attractive one, as he had found before, but its object was unpleasant to the point of gruesomeness. His sensitive, high-strung nature shrank from further contact with the man who was now more dead to him than alive. Would that senile mind, so facile in its flights, suspect the guilty thoughts which were running rife through his brain? Would the once shrewd reader of men's motives see through the mask of the son he had loved and trusted?

He had been seated only a few minutes in the parlor of the asylum when Dr. Hamilton came in and extended his hand perfunctorily.

"I'm glad you came this morning," he began, a thoughtful frown settling on his face. "I like to be in close association with the relatives of my patients, especially in critical cases, and I am sorry to have to report that your father is still not doing so well as I expected. He passed a very rough night, and gave the attendants considerable trouble. He has surprising physical strength when wrought up, and you may find that his face and hands are bruised a little; but it is due to his stout resistance.

THE INNER LAW

You can well see, I presume, that absolute control of such patients is necessary?"

"Yes, of course," Carter answered. "I suppose there is no other way. Am I to see him this morning?"

"Yes, I have already prepared him as well as I could for your visit. In a dim way he is expecting you, though he seems to wonder why you and he are not together all the time. When you meet him I'd advise you to humor him as much as possible."

"Is he in his—his bedroom?" Carter inquired.

"Not at present. There is a large parlor on that floor which is used by some of the patients, and he is there now, carefully watched by two attendants. We may go up now, if you wish."

Dr. Hamilton led him to the elevator. They ascended to the third floor and got out. At the end of a long, bare corridor, on the plain white walls of which hung no ornaments or pictures, was a closed door. Reaching it, the doctor rapped sharply and an attendant opened it from the inside.

The floor had no carpet. There was a massive oaken table in the center of the room, and scattered here and there were heavy straight-backed chairs of the same material. A babble of voices burst forth as the door opened. There were nine or ten men of various ages standing about, and most of them were talking and gesticulating wildly. One man was striding back and forth, singing a religious song, clapping his hands and shouting: "Praise the Lord! Praise the Redeemer, the Saviour of damned souls!" Another stood in a corner of the room making a disjointed political speech. Another was laughing hilariously and shedding tears at the same time.

Seated at a window, Carter saw the drooping form of his father. Gilbert seemed to be almost asleep. The doctor went to him and touched his shoulder lightly.

THE INNER LAW

Gilbert looked up quickly, sprang to his feet, backed against the wall, began to shake his fist in the doctor's face and stammer out a flow of unintelligible words.

"I've brought your son to see you. Now be quiet," Dr. Hamilton said, firmly.

Herewith Carter stepped forward and met his father's furious glare. Gilbert's brow was bruised and swollen, his lower lip gashed and bleeding, a scrap of sticking-plaster hanging loosely from the wound.

"W-w-where've y-y-you been?" Gilbert demanded. "Where were you when th-th-these th-thugs held me down and tied me to the bed?"

"I had to see Farnham," the son returned, inventing the best excuse available.

"Farnham? Then you—you saw him, did you? What d-d-did—did he say?"

"The road is all right, father. He will be here to see you soon." Carter had to raise his voice to be heard above the noise on all sides.

"I—I don't believe it," Gilbert fumed. "They are all tricking me—they are fooling *you*, too. Why d-d-don't they let me out of here?"

"You are not exactly well, father," Carter said, looking at the doctor. "You do not realize it, but you are not well, and must stay here under the doctor's care till—"

"Me sick? Who, me? It's a dirty lil-lil-lie! Henry and your sister are at the bottom of it! They are trying to rob us, I tell you. They may rope Farnham in, too. They w-w-will do anything to get my money. Farnham's no saint, either. Look how he acts with the wives of other men? You—you watch 'im."

A drowsy look was stealing over the old man's face. He stared about him aimlessly for a moment, then sank limply into his chair, dropped his head, closed his eyes, and began to breathe loudly.

THE INNER LAW

"Come away now," Dr. Hamilton whispered, and, unnoticed by Gilbert, they left the room.

"You may think it is not good to have him with the others," the doctor remarked, when they were downstairs; "but it is better for him. The sight of you roused him considerably just now, but just before you came he was much quieter—in fact, he was laughing with some of the others. If you remain in Cincinnati you might come out every other day, or say twice a week. Of course you could return to Atlanta and I could telegraph you; but I am bound to inform you that your father might die at any moment, and suddenly. He might linger for months, but it is not likely. He doesn't take proper nourishment. We can't well force it on him; it would be more cruel than kind in a case where death is only a question of time."

"I shall remain close at hand," Carter said. "Telephone me if there is any change and I'll drive out at once."

"Very well," Dr. Hamilton answered. "I want to please my patrons, and if there is anything I can possibly do please don't hesitate to call on me. I'm glad to see that you yourself are looking better already. You are still worrying, I think, but you must throw it off."

CHAPTER XVIII

ON the whole, the weeks which followed were passed agreeably enough by the young poet. He readily adapted himself to the routine of his slight daily avocations. Almost every morning he wrote a line to Milicent. He either telephoned to the asylum or drove out to see how his father was getting along. After the first week his visits became less often, for he saw that they did his father no good and only served to depress himself. The luxury of living in a fine hotel became more and more agreeable. He found that there was a considerable German population in the city, and both as a pastime and as a preparation for his life in Europe he, already a master of French, took up the study of conversational German. He spent many of his evenings in the beer-halls and beer-gardens, where he confined himself to that tongue. He was liberal with his funds, and made congenial acquaintances among dancers, singers, and actresses of the vaudeville class. He bought many books and read a good deal, chiefly the best works of poets and philosophers.

There was one disagreeable thought which constantly haunted him, and that was that he was producing nothing himself in the way of poetry. Even the scheme for his great epic had become vague and shadowy. Something was wrong, but he could not tell what it was. He was too young to understand that his failure to write was due to his absorption in sensual pleasures at the expense of his art. He kept telling himself that the inspiration would come again in due time. It would come when this worry over his father was past, when he was wholly his

THE INNER LAW

own master and could visit the far-off places his fancy had so warmly painted with the brush of ideality. It would come when his debt to Lydia was paid in some form or other.

He had been to a dinner party one evening with some of his new friends, and returned to his hotel, when to his great surprise he found his Uncle Thomas waiting for him in the foyer of the hotel. There was something reluctant, it seemed, in the way the old man offered his hand. There was an evasive shifting of the latter's gentle eyes, as they walked into the smoking-room and sat down.

"I had no idea you were coming," Carter said. "Milly didn't write me you intended to do so."

"I decided rather suddenly," Thomas answered, slowly, as if carefully weighing his words, his unreadable eyes still averted. "Your sister has been writing me every day or so, giving me your reports. She did not happen to mention where you were living, and so—so I could not write to you myself."

"I see," the nephew said. He was strangely embarrassed, and why he could not have explained. "I presume you will want to see him to-morrow?"

"I've already seen him."

"Oh, you have!"

"Yes. When I got here at noon to-day I thought you were staying at the sanitarium, and so I went there direct from the train. Dr. Hamilton gave me this address, and so I came here and took a room for the night."

"And what did you think of him?" Carter asked, wondering what the almost palpable thing was which seemed to hang between him and his uncle.

The old man shrugged his shoulders, still avoiding his nephew's groping stare. "It is as bad as it could be," was the reply. "He is dying rapidly. He didn't even recognize me. I suppose that it is well that I saw him again, but I did not come to see *him*, really."

THE INNER LAW

Thomas paused, his eyes on the Turkish rug at his feet. It was as if he wanted to go further, but was unable to formulate the requisite words with which to express himself.

"You did not come to see *him*?" Carter said, perplexed. "Then you came on business of your own?"

"I came to see *you*. I wanted to talk to you about something of a—a rather delicate nature, but I have decided to wait till it is all over here and you return home. Dr. Hamilton says your father is sinking very rapidly. He was walking about this morning and fell down suddenly. They put him to bed, and he may not leave it again."

"Yes, he can't last long now," Carter said, conscious that the sigh he gave was somewhat artificial. "It is only a question of a few days. Was it any matter pertaining—to his estate that you wanted to speak to me about?"

"No, it wasn't that." Thomas flashed a sudden glance at his nephew and then looked down. "He was good enough, as you may know, to lend me some money a year ago, but I paid off the debt in the spring."

"And you do not feel inclined to—to tell me about it—I mean about the matter that you thought of mentioning?"

"No, not now," Thomas said, firmly, and with what seemed to be a little shudder. "Your place is here now, at such a critical time, and—and everything else must wait. But when you get back to Atlanta you will come right out—to see me, won't you?"

"Yes, of course. In fact, I want very much to come again, and—"

"Have I your *faithful promise* that you will do so without delay after it is all over?"

"Yes, certainly. In fact, I shall need the rest and quiet of the mountains after all this worry and strain on my nerves. Of course, I've tried to divert my thoughts as much as possible."

THE INNER LAW

A frown settled on the old man's face. To his nephew's surprise, he got up suddenly and extended his hand. On grasping it Carter felt it quivering.

"I am very tired from my trip, and shall turn in," Thomas said in a low voice, "and as I leave on a very early train—six o'clock—I'll say good-by now."

"Good-by," Carter answered, and at the desk in the office, where his uncle was asking for the key to his room, they separated.

The young man bought a cigar at the news-stand and went back into the smoking-room. He was haunted by a subconscious hint of something he could not grasp—something which his uncle's personality seemed to give forth and yet hold in check.

There was some sad mystery about Thomas Crofton, and this hurried visit had something to do with it. Well, he would understand it later. He was sure the old sufferer was going to confide in him. Yes, that was it. Before long he would know the cause, perhaps, of his uncle's moody habits and lonely way of living.

Meanwhile he had begun to smoke. His promise to his uncle to visit him now brought up visions of delight. He would see Lydia every day and tell her how beautiful she was, and how he had missed her. He would tell her of his plans—their plans. She no doubt understood by this time why he had left her so abruptly, and would forgive him. He was quite a man of the world now. He was no longer a callow, inexperienced boy. Those weeks of bohemian freedom spent in Cincinnati had taught him that the habits of a man of fortune and genius could never fit the mold adapted to the humdrum and the ordinary. He smiled as he thought of what a simpleton he must have appeared to the experienced Farnham. Well, he would lose no time in showing his friend that his boyhood was over and that he was as wise in the way of the world as Farnham or any of his class.

CHAPTER XIX

ONE morning, a few days later, he waked earlier than usual. He had been out till late the night before, his head was aching, and he felt unaccountably depressed. As he dressed and saw his heavy eyes and haggard face in his mirror the thought came to him that perhaps something quite serious had happened to his father, and that his feelings were due to a premonition of it. He tried to banish the impression as he ate his breakfast in the café, but it clung to him so persistently that it took away his appetite. He had not seen his father for several days, and his conscience sharply accused him of filial neglect. He had the waiter order a carriage for him so that he might take it immediately after breakfast, for he was determined now to delay no longer in going to the asylum.

He had reached the door when a porter came to him hurriedly.

"You are wanted on the 'phone," the man said.

"The 'phone!" Carter repeated, his heart sinking under a sudden conviction that he was to hear unpleasant news.

The man led him to a booth and he entered, closed the glass door, and took up the receiver.

"Hello!" he said.

"Hello!" came back on the wire. "I'm waiting to speak to Mr. Carter Crofton. Why can't I get him?"

"I am Mr. Crofton," Carter answered. "Who is that?"

THE INNER LAW

"Oh, I see! I am Dr. Hamilton, Mr. Crofton. I don't want to excite you unduly, but you'd better come out at once. Your father is not so well."

"I was just starting out." Carter was conscious of the need of some explanation. "I would have been out before this, but was engaged on some work and special reading I was doing; besides, I thought that I could really do no good out there."

The anticipated agreement to this was oddly lacking. There was a short pause, and then Dr. Hamilton answered in a tone that seemed to the young man to be abrupt, hurried, if not contemptuous.

"You'd better drive fast, I think; they have sent for me again, and you may not really be in time."

The close air of the booth was suffocating. A dizzy sensation came over him. He hung up the receiver, pushed the door open, breathed in the fresh air, and hastened out to the carriage. Not see him alive—not see Gilbert Crofton alive! Could it be possible that death, actual death, had come to that particular man? He sprang into the carriage, ordered the driver to make all possible speed, and as he leaned back and closed his eyes he became the prey of a thousand poignant thoughts and visions of the past. He recalled the old man's gentleness and kindness to him all through his childhood, and his constant revelations of confidence in him. He remembered how proud Gilbert had been of his poetic talent and his college degree, and the many times that the old man had seemed to check an impulsive affection that he was too proud to show. Then there was that special gift of the railroad interest over the inheritance of the other two heirs. All that was from a man who, perhaps in great pain and even lucidness of mind, was dying while the ungrateful recipient was enjoying himself in the most sensual manner with degraded associates.

At the door of the asylum he met Dr. Hamilton. "I

THE INNER LAW

am sorry to say that you are too late," he said, as he led Carter into the parlor.

"Too late?" Carter felt the words stir his brain, but they did not reach his lips.

"He began to sink very rapidly about eight o'clock this morning," the doctor continued. "I was needed at his bedside, and so I could not 'phone as quickly as I wished. In such cases I always like to have some representative of the relatives of my patients present at the end, but, you see, owing to your staying in town, it was not possible in this case. They have laid out the body in his room, and you may see it now if you wish."

"I think I'll go up," Carter said, his voice having a far-off and unfamiliar sound even to his own ears. There seemed to be an accusing coldness in the doctor's manner. It struck Carter as being so, who was not familiar enough with the ways of such establishments to know that Dr. Hamilton would have been less than human if he had not felt the financial loss incurred by the too-early death of his wealthiest patient.

"The attendant will show you up," Hamilton said. "I am busy right now, but shall see you before you leave."

The attendant opened the door of the room Gilbert had occupied, and when Carter had entered it he withdrew, softly closing the door behind him. The bed had been removed, and on some smooth boards resting on undertaker's stools, beneath a sheet, lay the wasted form of the dead man.

The morning sunlight streamed against the yellow shade of the window, the shadows of the prison-like iron bars showing through in black squares. The face was covered with a thin white cloth which gave forth the sickening odor of some disinfectant, and for a moment Carter stood almost without the courage to lift it. His mother's had been the only dead face he had ever seen. He had always

THE INNER LAW

avoided such sights, telling himself that they were not good for his temperament; but something told him that it was his sacred duty now to look at the face beneath the cloth. He took a step or two back and forth, but the sound of his shoes on the bare floor grated on his highly wrought nerves, and he paused at the head of the corpse. His fingers seemed lifeless prongs in stiff motion as they pinched up the cloth at the edges and turned it back. There it lay in the yellow light—that ashen face, so like and yet unlike what it once had been. The lips were set, as if they had been pressed tightly together in the last desperate throes of conscious existence. The lids of the eyes were closed, the balls all but visible through the thin skin. The cheek-bones seemed ready to push through the decaying flesh that covered them. The whole object was but a skeleton clothed in parchment.

Almost with a sob of terror and grief combined Carter replaced the cloth and stepped back. There was a chair near the window, and he sank into it. He felt that he ought to cry, ought to shed tears, and he actually tried to do so. He heard himself whimpering and moaning, and, in accordance with his introspective habit, wondered if any actual sincerity lay beneath the uncouth effort. Had he not looked for his father's death as something to be desired for the sake of the chief sufferer and all others concerned? Then why should he be grieved? Was it not best to have the prolonged agony over? It seemed so, and yet there was that still thing beneath the cloth. It had something to say, and it was saying it as mutely as a signal-flag waved out of the infinite by the very hand of God. It was saying:

“As he lies there so you must lie. What do you think about it? What are you going to *do* about it? The man that occupied that wormy husk led a self-absorbed life and finally reached this goal. And you yourself were so eager to plunge into the mire of sensuality that you

THE INNER LAW

could not spare a moment from your revelries to hold his hand while the last throb of life flickered in it. You—what are you, anyway? Poet? Are you a poet? Poets have *souls*. You have none.”

He was stifling. He seemed to be breathing into his lungs the very atoms of his father’s body which, released by decay, were floating like sentient insects in the air. He got up and went to the door; but with his hand on the latch he paused. He remembered hearing an old woman in the mountains say, superstitiously, that it was well to touch the face of the dead—that such an act helped the living bear the loss of the departed. Reluctantly he went back. Slowly he raised the cloth, finding now that he was not so horrified as before. Putting his hand against the cheek, cleanly shaven since death, he stroked it. Then an impulse flowed through him that he could not resist; he bent and tenderly kissed the cold, clammy brow.

“Oh, father, forgive me!” he cried; and then his tears flowed freely. Through them he gazed upon the pale mask. Strange, but the whole contour now seemed lined in transcendental peacefulness. Sobbing deep in his breast, Carter kissed the brow again. He put his hand down under the sheet and pressed the fingers of the stiff hands crossed like slabs of ice upon the cold chest. Then he turned from the room and descended the stairs.

He was on the lawn, walking to and fro on the greensward, still wondering over his complex emotions and trying to analyze them, when Dr. Hamilton approached.

“I presume you will want to take the remains to Atlanta?” he said, tentatively.

“Yes, of course,” Carter answered, “and as early as possible.”

“A reliable undertaker has just come from the city. He is waiting, and if you care to consult him—”

THE INNER LAW

"I'd be glad to leave it all to him and you," Carter interrupted. "I want no expense spared."

"Very well," the doctor returned. "You can trust him thoroughly. I have known him several years. You may leave all arrangements in his hands. If you would like to accompany the remains the body can go on the same train you take. The railways require that a regular first-class ticket be bought for a corpse, and they attend to everything *en route*. The casket would have to be transferred only once between here and Atlanta, and that is at Chattanooga. The best train leaves here at ten o'clock to-night, and you can get sleeper accommodations on it. The undertaker will arrange that, too, so you may do as you like till leaving-time to-night."

"Thank you," said Carter, vaguely relieved. "Then I'll take that train, and shall expect everything to be done as you say."

He drove back to the city. He first sent a telegram to his sister, then another to his uncle, informing them of the death and the hour of his arrival in Atlanta. After that he was free to pass the intervening time as he liked, and it was just noon. He sat down in the smoking-room of his hotel with a newspaper and a cigar, but his former sense of ease and content at such moments was gone. The very atmosphere about him seemed charged with some element, psychic or otherwise, which was new and indescribable. Dead? How could his own father—Gilbert Crofton, that man of force, energy, and hope—be actually gone for ever? He told himself that it was unrealizable, and yet it was true.

He remembered that he had planned to go to a certain vaudeville performance that afternoon to see a French *danseuse*, whom he had met at a dinner in a bachelor's rooms, in a startlingly original act; in fact, he had a ticket for a box seat in his pocket; but now, of course, he would not go. But why should he allow what had happened to

THE INNER LAW

interfere? Would it not be sensible in him to resort to any means to banish the terrible mood that was on him? He thought so, and yet he could not fully decide to go.

He went to the theater as the hour approached. He saw the people going in and reached the door himself, and then turned slowly and aimlessly back to his hotel. Then the thought came to him that there was a book he wanted to consult in the public library, and he directed his steps thither, only to find at the door of the building that he was in no mood for reading. Thereupon he began to stroll about the city, telling himself that the exercise would fatigue him, cause him to sleep on the Pullman, and thus provide, at least, temporary oblivion.

Herewith his thoughts took him swiftly to Atlanta. The morning papers would contain lengthy accounts of the death of the city's wealthiest citizen. Mention would be made of the son who was bringing home the remains for interment—the brilliant son of whom the State was so proud, and who now had the heartfelt sympathy of the public at large in his great bereavement. Then there would be the service at the church. He saw Milicent veiled from head to foot in black; Henry, if the man could be found and coached into his duty, would be there, looking strangely out of place; also Thomas Crofton, the taciturn brother of the deceased, and himself, upon whom all eyes would rest in sympathetic admiration, for what could be more interesting than the grief of a high-strung, sensitive poet?

CHAPTER XX

HE was at the train a few minutes before leaving-time. He was unaccompanied by any of his new friends; he had not informed them even of his father's illness, so, of course, information of the death would be out of place. Besides, he doubted that he would ever meet any of them again, for he was sure he would go abroad very soon. He was about to step into the sleeping-car in the station when he was accosted by a stranger wearing a silk top-hat and black frock-coat. The man bowed servilely and introduced himself as the undertaker in charge of the remains. He pointed to a truck, among some others laden with trunks, which held, as its sole burden, a long unpainted box.

"They are going to put it in the baggage-car now," he said. "I waited for you to come. Some like to see them safely put on, and I thought I'd give you the chance if you got here soon enough. Those are my men there. They know their business. If there is a single thing wrong when you get home it won't be my fault. Part of the road is rough between here and Atlanta, and he might shake about some, but—"

"I understand," Carter interrupted, as the man led him toward the box. On the end of it was tacked a shipper's card with something written upon it.

"If you are satisfied, I'll order my men to go ahead," said the undertaker.

"Yes, go ahead," was the reply; and Carter stood by and saw the truck rolled up to the car door and the box shoved in. Then he shook hands with the undertaker,

THE INNER LAW

thanked him, and went to his seat in the Pullman. The undertaker, however, soon followed him.

"There is a thing I intended to mention, but I overlooked it," he said, his hat in his hand. "A transfer of the remains must be made in Chattanooga. You may be asleep when the train gets there, and I thought that I'd tell you if you don't want to get up to see the transfer made that you needn't do so. The baggage-master is a friend of mine, and he has promised me that he will pay special attention to the transfer."

"I'll be up," Carter said, coldly. "I'll have the porter call me."

"Well, just as you wish," the man said, bowing again and moving away.

A moment later the train started. Three men seated near him had taken out a deck of cards, ready to begin a game of poker. One of them, who looked like a traveling salesman, caught his eyes and smiled. "Want to come in?" he asked.

Carter shook his head mechanically and declined. "I'm tired and am going to bed early," he said.

Shortly afterward his berth was made ready and he undressed and lay down. The air in the car was stuffy and close, and his brain seemed over-active. The conversation on all sides, the rumble of the wheels, disturbed him. There were so many things to think about. He was now a man of wealth and importance and perfectly free to live as he liked. Still he was depressed. He told himself that it was owing to his being within only a few car-lengths of the actual corpse of his father, whom he had loved so tenderly. Well, the ordeal would be over after another day and life would then go on as it should. The great epic would be written; even the sorrow he was now experiencing might add a deeper note to his work. Presently his thoughts became jumbled and vague, and he slept.

THE INNER LAW

He was dreaming. He seemed to be in London. His poems had crossed the ocean and were being read all over Europe. He was in a drawing-room filled with personages of rank, title, and genius. He was being lionized, a veteran English poet was congratulating him. Some one led out to dinner. A stately lady bedecked with jewels and in the richest costume was on his arm. Suddenly into the whole brilliant scene came a metallic grinding sound. The faces and forms in the dream were blurred. The lady on his arm was acting queerly. He was studying her twisting features in slow amazement, and then he saw that she was Lydia.

"You cannot get away from me," she said, "for I am on your soul."

He waked with a start. Some one was pulling at his arm. It was the negro porter.

"You said you wanted to be up at Chattanooga," the man reminded him. "We'll be there in fifteen minutes."

The berth curtains closed. Raising the shade of his window, he saw that dawn was breaking, barely breaking, in the dun eastern skies. He shuddered. He had seemed to be far off in some sort of transcendental freedom, and now he was occupied with the most gruesome of duties as the sole guardian of the body of the man from whose loins he had sprung. He shivered from the chill of early morning and dressed himself, feeling as lonely there among the closed curtains of strange sleepers as a disembodied soul seeking light in a new and darkened existence.

When the train had stopped he went out to the platform. The gray light of dawn lay like a fog over everything. The lanterns of the trainmen shone and waved here and there. Few persons were in sight. He walked ahead to the baggage-car, to the door of which a truck was being trundled. It was for trunks, and he had to wait for another which was to do the work he was to inspect. The loaded truck rolled away and another took

THE INNER LAW

its place. Then the unpainted box was slid out upon the truck, where it rested till a switch-engine brought into place the car which was to take the remains on to Atlanta.

He had seen the work properly done, and was starting back to the Pullman when a man approached him from behind and touched his arm. It was Farnham.

"Hello, old chap!" he said, softly, as he took his friend's hand and pressed it sympathetically. "Surprised to see me, I guess. I ran up to meet you—spent the night here at the hotel, and had them call me. I'm going back on your train."

"It is very good of you, Charley. I wasn't expecting any one, and I am more than glad to see you."

The locomotive's bell was ringing. The conductor was calling out, "All aboard!" and the two friends hastened toward the Pullman.

"Do you want to go back to bed?" Farnham asked, as they stood in the smoking-room.

"No; I couldn't sleep," Carter said. "What are you going to do?"

"Sit up and chat with you here till the dining-car opens at eight o'clock; then we'll have breakfast together."

"Very well; that will be nice," Carter said, gratefully. "I'm glad you came up. How are they all at home?"

"Very well, I think. Your sister was quite shocked by your telegram. I called as soon as I heard the news, but could not see her. I think she is better now. Henry was there and your uncle Tom. Together we planned the arrangements. The remains are to be taken to your house, where they will stay till to-morrow morning, when a church service is to be held. The afternoon papers were full of it, and I look for big accounts in the papers this morning. I am glad to be able to tell you that your father's business affairs are in first-rate order. Your sister was worried about his life-insurance policies,

THE INNER LAW

but I found that all the premiums were paid up. She was afraid, too, that he might have made some serious financial mistake when his mind was not exactly right, but last night I was talking with McCorkle, who has his papers in charge, and he says they are in tip-top shape, so I assured her that there was nothing to worry about. As for the railroad, that is in better condition than ever; and think of it, my boy, you now own fully one-third of it."

"I am sure I owe that to you," Carter said. "It was a whim my father had to give it to me because you and I are friends."

"It may be as you say," Farnham admitted. "Now let us talk of something else. The old have to die to make place for the young, and goodness knows you have nothing to complain of. Your path is certainly strewn with roses if ever a man's was."

CHAPTER XXI

AS they left the train in the depot in Atlanta they saw Larkin, whip in hand, at the door leading to the street.

"Now you drive straight home," Farnham said, as he parted from Carter. "I'll attend to everything here. The hearse is waiting. Milicent will be impatient to see you."

"Thank you, Charley; you are very kind."

A few minutes later he alighted at home. Milicent met him at the door and coldly kissed him. She was dressed in black. Her face was very grave, but it showed no signs of tears.

"Oh, you must have had an awful, awful time up there through it all!" she said. "You are too young and sensitive to have undertaken it."

"I'm all right," he said, returning her kiss and going into the hall, his arm about her waist. Larkin followed with his bag and bore it solemnly up the stairs to his room.

The drawing-room held great heaps of flowers which had been sent by friends, and the air was full of their blended fragrance. The chairs had been placed close against the walls, and in the center stood the undertaker's stools ready to support the casket.

"I understand uncle and Henry are here," Carter remarked.

"Yes. Henry is in his room as restless as a fish out of water. I am ashamed of him. It looks as if he begrudges

THE INNER LAW

even this one day to us in our trouble. He has sunken very low. He actually had the audacity to try to borrow some of my money just now. I wouldn't let him have it, even if he is to come into his part of the estate. Do you blame me?"

"No, I suppose not," he said, surprised that she should make so sordid a remark at such a moment. "Where is uncle?"

"He is out on the back porch. He seems to be in one of his gloomy moods. He says nothing, and only walks up and down with his hands behind him. We are a strange family, brother—we really are. I realize it more and more every day. But it is a comfort to feel that we are not left poor, as many children are. Mr. McCorkle says father's affairs are in good order."

"I'll go speak to uncle," Carter said; and he turned down the hall toward the door in the rear.

He found Thomas Crofton standing on the steps of the porch, his back to the door, staring out into the garden. His head was bare, and somehow the gray hair stroked back from his high brow seemed to his nephew to be more scant than formerly. Hearing Carter's step, he turned, seemed to start as if in surprise, then with a touch of reluctance he held out his hand.

"You are in on schedule time, I see," he said, simply. "That must have been a tiresome trip. He died somewhat sooner than I expected or—or I'd have stayed over to help you."

"Yes, it was rather sudden," Carter answered.

The hearse was now at the door, and a moment later the attendants bore the casket up the steps and into the drawing-room. The two men stood silently listening to the harsh grind of feet on the parlor floor. Presently the attendants filed out through the hall and descended the steps.

"Will you go in and see him?" Carter asked. "I think the top of the casket has been removed."

THE INNER LAW

"No, I'll not see him—yet!" Thomas answered, with a visible shudder and a sudden grim setting of his features. "In fact, I may not look at him at all. But your sister and Henry may be waiting for you. I'll stay out here at present, anyway. But wait a minute—just a minute. You promised me—you remember, up in Cincinnati—you promised to come out to my place as soon as it was all over. I'm going back this afternoon. Could you come, say, the day after to-morrow, *without fail*?"

"Why, yes, of course! I see nothing to prevent it; but are you not going to remain? Surely you know that the funeral is to be to-morrow?"

Thomas dropped his glance. "I know that, but I cannot stay. I have my reasons. I sha'n't be missed here, and—and I must go back, that's all. I must go back at once. I'll make it all plain to you later. You'll understand, and will excuse me if the rest do not. Say I'm sick—say anything, but keep your promise. That is the main thing now. I'll look for you. You really mean to come, don't you?"

"Why, yes, certainly," Carter answered in surprise. "In fact, I am looking forward to it. There are too many sad reminders here, while out there in the mountains with you—"

"Well, don't forget. The afternoon train is best. My carriage will meet you at the station about sundown."

"But couldn't you stay over?" Carter asked.

"No, no. It is out of the question. I—I'm needed there more than here. I would go at once, but there is no earlier train."

"Something is troubling you," Carter ventured. "I saw that in Cincinnati. You seem even more worried now."

"Yes, it is trouble, but I can't explain now. Nobody can help me but *you*, and you say you are coming without fail?"

THE INNER LAW

"Yes, without fail, and if it is money you need, uncle, you have only to mention—"

"It is not money," Thomas blurted out. "God knows I wish it were that."

Carter shuddered. His gloom, almost like a palpable substance, clung to him as he went into the house in search of Milicent. "His mind may be failing, too," he reflected. "He certainly is acting strangely. His brooding habits and solitary life are killing him."

He did not see Milicent, and he sat down in the library to wait for her. The door which led into the parlor was open, and he caught a glimpse of the somber casket in the center of the room. He knew that the face of the corpse was exposed to view; but he felt no inclination to see it just now. When Milicent came he would support her through the ordeal, but not till then would he look at the vanishing symbol of the man he had loved.

He began to make plans. Somehow such thoughts charged upon him like soldiers in ambush at the most unexpected moments. To-morrow morning the funeral would be over. The grim thing on the stools and in its box of metal would be put for ever out of sight, and he would be free to think and act for himself again. The following day would find him at his uncle's. The business, whatever it was, would soon be settled, and then he would take one of his glorious mountain walks. He would have to pass Mrs. Romley's cabin. Lydia would be outside at work. He would slip up behind her while she stood at the well or the wash-tub. She would cry out and blush in blended joy and surprise. He would clasp her in his arms, kiss her beautiful mouth, and tell her how he had missed her, longed for her and suffered for the lack of her sweet companionship through all his trouble.

Milicent was coming down the stairs, followed by Henry, and Carter rose to meet them. Milicent was weeping

THE INNER LAW

softly, and it struck Carter that his brother, spick and span in new clothes, was a most ridiculous sight as he stood wiping his dry eyes on a black-bordered handkerchief, screwing his face into a look of woe, and making a snuffing sound through his drink-reddened nose.

CHAPTER XXII

ON the day following the funeral Carter alighted from the train at Benton. Old Hank was there with the carriage to meet him, and they were soon on the way to the farm.

"How is my uncle?" Carter inquired. "He did not seem quite well in Atlanta the other day."

"De Lawd only know what do ail Marse Tom," Hank said, succinctly. "Some'n's wrong, but I don't know what 'tis. Fer de last mont'—sence you lef' 'im—he's been act powerful quar an' restless. I've ketched 'im up at all hours thoo de night, an' heard 'im prayin' time after time when he didn't know I was nigh 'im."

Carter did not encourage the negro to gossip. He felt inspired by the glow the setting sun had spread on the western sky. Ah, real life was just beginning for him! There were thousands of adventures and experiences ahead. He would write great poems. He would become the man he was expected to become by competent authorities. He would live abroad. In fact, he would sail very soon, for the change was just what he needed. He might take Lydia, and he might not be able to do so. The enjoyment of her beauty there in the mountains in secret was one thing, but to take her with him might be difficult. He would want to marry some day, and surely in time a girl like Lydia would become a decided incubus even to a man of wealth. Surely a young man ought not to tie his life to his first indiscretion. He told himself that he would wait till he had seen her again and talked

THE INNER LAW

it all over. Therewith he became impatient. The horses seemed to be going very slowly. The night was about to fall. Mrs. Romley soon would be going back to the cabin, and he would have to wait till the next day for a chance to see the girl alone. How could he possibly wait so long with no companion save his taciturn, gloomy uncle?

It was almost dark when they reached the farm. On the lawn beneath the trees, among his beehives, without his hat, stood Thomas Crofton. Carter saw him slowly turn and look in his direction, and was somewhat surprised that the old man seemed to hesitate for a moment before advancing to him. It was unlike his uncle's usual cordial manner, and the cold, limp hand which Thomas extended, when he finally met his nephew, seemed a further departure from former habits.

"Just in time for your supper," Thomas said, leading the way up the veranda steps. "It's on the table. Go in and help yourself. There will be nobody to wait on you to-night. Things here are a little upset just now. I've had my milk and bread; that is all I want, so don't wait for me. I'll stay out here awhile. In such weather as this a stuffy house drives me crazy. I must be out in the open or I can't breathe."

Carter went into the dimly lighted dining-room. A good cold supper was spread for him, and yet it had an uninviting look. He told himself, with a pang of disappointment, that Mrs. Romley had already finished her work and gone back to the cabin, and, that being the case, he would have to wait till the next day to see Lydia. The thought angered him. An evening spent with so morose and non-communicative a companion as Thomas Crofton was anything but enticing. It would be some new phase of the old man's troubles. Some speculation had gone the wrong way, money was needed to save the farm, and to whom could Thomas more reasonably turn

THE INNER LAW

than to a nephew who had fallen heir to such substantial wealth? Carter's wrath increased as he sat down and began to eat. He told himself that he really was too good-natured. Every poor relative and friend would now try to ride him like a free horse, and if he did not look keenly to his own interests how could he keep his income up to what it ought to be to further his future plans? Yes, it was money Thomas Crofton was after, and he was counting on it so surely that he could even demand an immediate visit from the one who was to supply it. Well, he would look into the matter closely and he would require reasonable security, if any loan was made. He told himself that he was a poet, but a poet who was descended from a shrewd, cautious business man, and he would not allow himself to be laughed at by business men who were no doubt predicting that he would soon throw away what was left to him.

He was finishing his supper when he heard his uncle pass through the hall and enter the library. Hank, who was seated in the kitchen, rose and went in after him.

"Mus' I light de lamp?" the negro asked; and Carter heard his uncle reply:

"No, it's warm, and the light attracts the moths. When my nephew has eaten his supper ask him to come to me here."

The delivery of the message was unnecessary, for Carter was already on his way to the library. He had to stand in the doorway for a moment to accustom himself to the darkness before seeing where his uncle was. It struck him as odd that the old man did not speak to him at the moment. It was odd, too, that he remained seated at the library table, his elbows on it, his head supported by his splaying hands.

"Sit down, please," Thomas said in a voice full of huskiness. "I'm obliged to have a talk with you, and I want it over with."

THE INNER LAW

There was a pause in which Carter took a seat near the bowed man. He now suddenly recalled that his uncle had assured him in Atlanta, and in Cincinnati also, that he was not in need of financial aid. So it was something else, but what? Thomas now had his hands over his face and began rubbing the sockets of his closed eyes with his fingers. His palms muffled his faltering voice when next he spoke.

"Would you mind closing the door?"

Full of intangible forebodings, Carter got up and complied. He was sorry that there was no light in the room. It was quite dark, now that the rays of the dining-room lamp were no longer admitted. In the gloom Thomas Crofton's skin seemed to shine faintly like phosphorus.

"I was afraid you would not come to-day," he said, huskily. "If you hadn't I'd have been in to-morrow. I've got to tell you something—I've got to tell you a thing that has never passed my lips—a thing known by no living creature. I want it off of my burthened soul. The telling of it may do you good. Who knows? God only can foresee the outcome. I may break down before I get through. It is a hard thing to put into words a matter that has never been expressed in words, that has only been in one's thoughts night and day for several years."

Carter heard the speaker heave a sigh. A feeling akin to terror was on him as he resumed his seat. Here, he told himself, was another case of insanity in the family, and it might foreshadow his own fate.

"Couldn't we wait till morning, uncle?" he pleaded, gently. "I am tired, and I see that you are unduly excited."

"No, no, I can't wait. I ought to have told you in Cincinnati. Failing that, I ought to have told you the day you got back to Atlanta. I ought to have told you the whole story over your father's dead body. I ought to

THE INNER LAW

leave no stone unturned to make you understand me fully and act, act, act!"

"You are excited, uncle," Carter repeated.

"I know it. I can't help it. I'm trying now to control myself. I must be calm. O God help me!" Thomas here beat his breast with his right hand, the dull strokes sounding through the room. "O God help me, and through me, help him. It is all I can offer now."

There was a pause. The house was very still. A cow was lowing in a distant pasture. A cricket beneath the sills of the building was snarling intermittently.

"I must tell you my life, and you must listen. You must not lose a word. I have spoken to you of the curse of lust that lies on us Crofton men. You've seen it in your father; you see it in your brother. It was in me—I say *was* because there is not now physical life enough left in my flesh and bones to foster it. The desperate yearning of my soul to escape it has borne fruit of a certain sort. I am trying to get right—trying to get forgiveness—trying to see God's face turned toward me.

"Listen. In college and afterward as a young unmarried man I gloried in the strength of my physical being. I lived as I saw fit, as your father lived, as most of our social equals lived. I thought nothing of a helpless woman's honor. Women were made for me and the like of me. I was on the point of marrying the woman who later became my wife. I loved her with a love that can never die. She loved me in return, and we became engaged to be married. She was too pure of mind to dream of the existence of the filth that lay in my being. I was her ideal, and I let her keep it. We were to be married in the winter, and in the early fall she went for a visit to her relatives in Virginia. It was then, while she was away, that I met a poor country girl of what we idle young slaveholders called the lowest class of whites. I managed to meet her almost daily. I knew that a young back-

THE INNER LAW

woodsman of fine character was in love with her. I knew that I ought not to come between the two, but my passion overpowered me. I won her confidence by a thousand tricks of face, voice, and action. I ruined her. Only a short while before my marriage, which I hoped God would bless, I wrecked the life of an innocent human soul. I tried to pacify the poor girl, but she was in torment, for she was facing disgrace through the consequence of our act. How it came about I do not know, but, in her despair, she confided in her old lover. He was a rare man, one in a million, for he came to me—not with murder in his mind, but with the sole hope of doing something for the girl he loved and pitied. He tried to get me to make her my wife. I told him of my engagement, and explained that it was utterly impossible. He pleaded; he wept; he told me she was his very life, and that if something was not done for her he would kill himself. He came to me several times, always with that desperate look in his dumb, pleading eyes. He spoke in dialect; he could not read or write, and yet I saw he was my spiritual superior. He was nearer God than I could ever expect to be. He opened my mind to things I had never dreamt of. He showed me what sin was. I wrestled with God and the devil. For days and nights I tried to muster up the courage to write my fiancée a frank confession and do my full duty by that helpless girl. But the world and its claims upon me overpowered me. I knew full well what God was demanding, and yet I was too weak to obey. Announcements had been made of my approaching marriage. I had talked with the relatives of my prospective wife. She and I had planned the building of this house. We were well mated socially and mentally, having like tastes, and her fortune was equal to mine. There is such a thing, my boy, as actually selling one's soul into the bondage of hell. Skeptics may sneer and sniff, but they wouldn't if they knew what I

THE INNER LAW

know. I know that in refusing God's aid at that time and taking the advice of the devil, I deliberately gave my soul over to the torments of the damned. I know there is a hell, for I have been in it for years.

"One day this man I have told you about came to me and said the girl had promised to marry him. I could have danced with joy to the music of hell itself. I told him he was saving me. Then I made a mistake. I offered to give him a certain sum of money. This enraged him. He shook his fist in my face; he caught my throat and started to strangle me, and then desisted, going away, declaring that nothing but just punishment could be my portion.

"I rankled under his fierce rebuke. It comes to me afresh every day. I cringed under the memory of it as I stood at the altar with my spotless bride on my arm in that fashionable old church. His prophecy of misfortune and his curse upon my life haunted me constantly. They were married and moved over the mountain into another county. A child was born—*my* child, and yet he gave the little girl his name. I saw her once by accident when she was about three years of age. She was beautiful, gentle, and refined. That, too, was added to the torture of my soul. I had robbed my own blood of its rights.

"We were living here, my wife and I, in this house, when our own baby was born. I had been ambitious to write poetry, as you now are, but all my inspiration suddenly left me. I could not fix my thoughts upon such work. The things I had done in the past filled my mind too completely.

"My son grew up to be a manly fellow, as you know. But God only knows what I suffered through him. I watched him constantly, fearing in my guilt that he would inherit the family lust. He was never out at night that I did not lie awake fancying that he was doing the things that I had done. He was pure in thought and deed, but

THE INNER LAW

part of my punishment was that I should judge him by myself. I was suffering the agonies of hell, and was resigned to it, but I could not bear the thought that my adored son would follow in my steps, down, down to damnation. I worshiped him. I actually worshiped him. Then he—"

The old man's voice became husky and inaudible. There was silence. Carter broke it.

"Why are you telling *me* all this?" he demanded, grown suddenly suspicious, even alarmed.

"Wait, and you will see." Thomas was recovering himself. "Wait. You'll understand—yes, yes, you surely will! Don't interrupt me. I must go on. My son, at the age of twenty, was visiting some friends over the mountain, and there—there he met and fell in love with—whom do you think? My God! in all the wide, wide world full of women whom do you think my boy met and loved? *His own half-sister!*"

"Oh!" escaped from the listener's tense lips.

"You may well exclaim, but do you fancy that was all? Do you think any but a wrathful, revenging God could visit such punishment on a guilty soul? The girl was poor, but she was beautiful and pure, and my son, meeting her in secret many times, and sure of her love, determined to marry her. He not only determined to do so, but he came and told me that he could not live without her. I was speechless; I was tied hand and foot; the more I tried to change his intentions, without being able to tell him the truth, the more determined he became. He defied me. They planned a secret elopement. He joined the girl one night. They were about to leave her home in a buggy. The girl, thinking her mother would be sympathetic, told her what she was about to do. Her mother tried to dissuade her, but, failing, became hysterical and confessed the truth to both of them. Tom came home directly. His mother and I were here in this

THE INNER LAW

very room when he staggered in, his clothing disarranged, his eyes wild and staring, his face haggard, and right here before the woman who till then had trusted me he told me what he had heard. He asked me if it was true. I could not lie to him. Then he told me that he hated me, that his soul writhed at the thought that he was the son of such a human scab. He turned and left us, went to his room and shut the door. I bent over his mother, who lay rather than sat in a chair. I started to raise her up, but, choking down a shriek of disgust, she sprang from me and hid herself in her own room.

"I sat here just as I am sitting now, facing what no other man has ever faced in the history of the world. Hours passed. There was no sound from my wife's room or from my son's. I went to her door and knocked. She came to the door, opened it a little, and coldly demanded that I should go away. I went to Tom's room. I rapped. There was no sound. I rapped again and again. Then I turned the latch and went in. He was lying on his bed. A box which had contained morphine powders lay on the floor. *He had killed himself.*"

"Oh, I didn't know that!" Carter cried in horror.

"No, I kept it a secret," the old man groaned, softly. "The first thing I did was to hide the evidence of the act. Then I sent for my wife. She came and looked at our boy, gently stroked his cold cheek, kissed his brow, and without looking at me she left the room. The coroner held an inquest. My wife was excused from being present, owing to prostration. I testified. To hide the awful truth I swore that my son had had touches of heart-weakness, and gave it as my opinion that his sudden death was due to heart-failure. It was believed. No human soul doubted it, save my wife, who was willing to hide the facts from the world.

"We buried him. My wife went into the church and to the grave on my arm. She returned here and lived be-

THE INNER LAW

fore the world as my wife for six months longer, but without ever speaking once to me. She died of a broken heart. But I lived on. People hinted that I was becoming insane; but I was and am to-day the sanest man alive, for I know better than the wisest man on earth the consequences of the violation of God's laws. My illegitimate daughter and her mother and foster father moved away. I have never seen them since."

"But why—why do you tell *me* all this?" Carter questioned, tremulously.

"Wait and you'll comprehend. I am coming to that now. I have tried every possible way to atone—to get peace. I prayed night and day for years. I humbled myself. Secretly I did all I could to help others. Then one day I read a notice about you and your bright prospects, and my heart warmed to you, as I remembered how Tom had loved you. I kept thinking about you and your future. You recall our talk at your house that evening? I thought I was reading you aright. I knew you were at the turning-point which all young men reach. You were surrounded by the same temptations that had surrounded me at your age. Your most intimate friend was Charley Farnham, and I knew his influence was bad, for everybody knows what sort of man he is. Do you know what I did before that talk with you? I prayed to God that He would let me be the means of saving you, and that your salvation might be a sign from on high that I was on the way to forgiveness."

"Of saving me?" Carter said, under his breath.

"Yes, for I saw the Crofton weakness in your eyes, in your full lips—in two or three of your poems—those which were not accepted for publication. I begged you to come live out here, you remember. That was to get you away from the city and its influences. I intended to unfold my history to you that it might be a lesson that you'd never forget. You came. I watched and

THE INNER LAW

prayed. I went away for days at a time and prayed alone on the mountain-top. My own salvation seemed to lie in your hands. Then, then—oh, my God!"

"What is the matter?" Carter gasped, uneasily. "Uncle, what is the matter?"

With a deep groan Thomas lowered his head to his hands and sat like a figure of stone.

"What is the matter?" Carter repeated, his voice shaking, a great fear clutching him.

"One evening," Thomas went on, with an effort to steady his voice, "I was out looking for you to inform you that you were wanted in Atlanta, your father being ill, and I saw you leaving Mrs. Romley's cabin. I was afraid even to hint to you what I feared, and so I let you leave without mentioning it."

"What—what you *feared*?" Carter echoed the words in quaking dismay. "Why, uncle, I—"

"Don't lie to me! I am in no mood for that. I won't stand it!"

"Then—then I won't," Carter muttered, doggedly. "I won't."

"It would do no good to lie. I was obliged to know the truth. I could not bear the suspense. I was looking for God's answer to my prayer in your conduct, so I watched the girl daily after you went to Cincinnati. One morning, when you had been away about two weeks, I found her weeping alone in the swamp. I sat down by her. I assured her I was her friend. I told her I would do anything on earth for her, and hinted that I suspected the truth and was sorry for her. She was touched by what I said, and, bursting into tears, she confessed everything. For more than an hour we sat there in silence, I as desperate as she. I finally advised her to tell her mother, and that night she did so."

Silence fell. Carter heard his uncle breathing heavily. Presently the young man spoke:

THE INNER LAW

"You've yielded to temptation yourself, uncle, and at my age, too; surely you won't judge me harshly. I had no idea of doing what I did. I know it was wrong, wrong, wrong, but it is done. It is over now."

"*Over?* You think it is over? Look at me and see if *mine* is over. I tell you—and I'm speaking with the very voice of God—I tell you if you do not profit by what I've told you, if you do not profit by the sight of me, as I sit here scorched by the flames of my writhing soul, your punishment may be even worse than mine is. You may be even more culpable, for you are now warned. If you do not do your duty—if you allow empty, God-cursed pride of birth and position to hold you back you will be selling your eternal soul for a mess of pottage. Your newly acquired gold, your puny fame, your family name—all that you value now will either vanish or mock your guilty soul when it is too late to undo what you have done."

The young man's head sank. His face was hot with shame. He crossed his legs and nervously fumbled the string of one of his shoes which rested on his quivering knee.

"You think I ought to make her my wife?" he asked, huskily.

"I *know* it. To do your duty may seem difficult, but to neglect it will destroy your peace of mind for ever. You've committed a crime. You have a chance to escape, a chance that I missed. The girl is uneducated, but she has a fine mind and will make you a faithful wife. God will bless you with ultimate happiness if you will stand by her like a man. You will never get over it if you don't."

"You are asking me to do what you yourself refused to do," Carter argued, faintly. "Can I be less human than you were at my age? In fact, it would be harder for me than it would have been for you. The critics, the press, my friends, society, all expect me to—"

THE INNER LAW

Thomas rose to his full height and stood slightly swaying in the dark. He snapped his fingers. "Only perdition could advance such empty excuses!" he cried, fiercely. "Do you think God will let *your* rotten plans succeed any better than He did *mine*? Did not my plans draw to my bosom a wife I adored, a son I worshiped, and did I not live to see them die with loathing in their hearts for me? Great heavens, man! Don't you see that I would not be demanding this with the last black drop of my lost soul's blood if it were not right? If I, who am almost the food of maggots, can look up from the depths of my own hell to plead with you to save yourself from my fate, how can you hesitate? Is your puny gift for jingling words, your possession of a name that is a lie and a sham, your ill-gotten wealth to stand between you and your honest duty?"

Carter rose. He caught his uncle's hand and pressed it. His voice shook. "You've said enough," he replied. "I'll do my duty. I promise it here and now. I'll go to her to-night. We'll be married at once."

"You can't—now, at least. She's gone," the old man said.

"Gone?"

"Yes. I didn't stay for the funeral and hurried back from Atlanta to prevent it, but failed. I did not like the way Mrs. Romley was acting. She is a queer woman. Without knowing the cause of it, she has known for some time that I am a miserable man. She was in great distress a few years ago. She needed money to help a brother of hers who was dying of consumption out West. I furnished it, and she is so grateful for my aid that she now looks upon this trouble as adding to mine, and so she has taken Lydia away. She has not once thought of your marrying her. In her humility—there are such persons in the world—she blames the girl rather than you; but that doesn't free you, you understand—not in God's eyes."

THE INNER LAW

"No, it doesn't free me," Carter agreed. "I'll follow them. Do you know where they went?"

"I managed to find that out," the old man answered. "I thought I might persuade you to do your duty. From the station agent at Benton I discovered that they have shipped their few belongings to New Orleans. Mrs. Romley once lived there with a married sister of hers, who is still there. I do not know the street or number; but if you will go to New Orleans at once you will be apt to run across them. I am quite sure that they are there, and intend to stay."

"I will take the first train to-morrow," Carter promised. "Uncle, will that satisfy you?"

"Yes, yes, and may God bless you, my boy." Suddenly the old man turned and abruptly stalked from the room, leaving his nephew standing at the table.

Carter sat down in the darkness. He locked his tense hands between his knees and bent forward. "I'll do it, I'll do it," he said, half aloud. "I love her—I love her! Oh, Lydia, will you ever forgive me? I want you—want you!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE following evening at eight o'clock Carter arrived in New Orleans. He went to the nearest hotel to the station, registered his name, and asked for the best room available.

"Ah, you are from Atlanta!" the dapper young clerk said with an affable smile. "I know *of* you, Mr. Crofton. I stayed for a while at the Kimball House in your bustling city. Down to see something of our society, eh? Well, it is gay enough here. You must see the French quarter. Let me know when you want to see the sights, and I'll put you on to the ropes. That's part of my duty."

"I am not going to see much of the city," Carter answered, awkwardly, angry over having to explain even so much to the mere night-clerk of a hotel, who he felt had no right to speak to him when he was in no mood for it.

"Ah, business, eh?" the clerk ran on.

"Yes, business. I am tired, and wish to go up to my room at once."

"Certainly, certainly." The clerk struck a call-bell, and a porter took his bag, conducted him to the elevator, and thence to his room. However, once there, and having bathed, dusted his clothes, and brushed his hair, there was nothing else he could think of doing, so he sat down and began to smoke. He took up a newspaper, but found that while his eyes were following the lines automatically he was unconscious of what they stood for. The incongruity of his position struck him keenly as he fell into his

THE INNER LAW

habit of introspection and self-analysis. Could any person of his acquaintance, on meeting him there, dream of the uncouth object of his visit? After all, had such a thing ever happened to a proud man of exquisite taste and refinement? He had always fancied that his wedding, when it did come about, would be of notable importance, and now he saw no other way than to make it very private, if not temporarily a secret one. He was disturbed by the thought of either contingency. If private, his marriage to a girl in Lydia's walk of life would have to be adequately explained and justified to a penetrating public which was watching his movements more just now than ever before. If secret, only one construction could be put upon his union with such a girl, and that construction would mar his life and Lydia's. Lydia was beautiful bodily, and her quick mind gave rare promise of future development, but just now to introduce her to his friends as his chosen life companion would excite comment, if not suspicion. What was to be done? Why had he not asked the advice of his uncle on those points?

The night was warm and sultry; the room seemed oppressively close, so, wrought to a high state of nervousness by the turmoil in his mind, he decided to go down to the streets and stroll about till a reasonable bedtime. He did not think it was likely that he would meet either Lydia or her mother, and vaguely he hoped he would not do so till he had slept upon the problem uppermost in his thoughts. So he walked through the streets, going here and there without aim or even knowledge of his whereabouts. Part of the time he was actually aglow with the expectation of meeting Lydia again and holding her to his breast and making arrangements for their immediate marriage; then again the two difficulties which he had just been considering confronted him like an impassable wall of stone. He told himself that he was not thinking of himself in viewing these difficulties, but of the beautiful

THE INNER LAW

mountain child whose future character must be considered as spotless since he himself had so ruthlessly handled her.

It was late when he finally returned to his room, and when he had undressed and was ready for bed he obeyed a sudden desperate impulse and sank on his knees and tried to pray to he knew not what, for a God of dogmatic origin no longer appealed to him. Still, he felt that there must be something in prayer. He felt that there might be, or ought to be, some spiritual principle, or intelligent force at the back of the universe, that would aid him. But though he prayed that night deeply and sincerely for guidance, no sort of response came, and with a groan of deeper indecision than ever he threw himself on the bed, where for hours he lay, unable to sleep.

A week went by without result in the quest which had brought him to New Orleans, and he was beginning to lose faith in his pursuit. He went to the post-office and inquired there for information, but received none. Such individuals were unknown to the postmaster or the mail-carriers. He went to police headquarters and mentioned his desire to find "two missing friends who had recently come to the city," but received no aid.

A fortnight passed and he was no whit nearer his object. He had lost flesh; he was pale, haggard, and nervous. He was returning one evening, when he found Farnham waiting for him in the foyer of the hotel. Their eyes met. Carter's glance fell to the ground, and a flush crept into his wan face as he reluctantly took his friend's extended hand.

"You are surprised to see me, I know," Farnham began, rather awkwardly for so suave an individual. "The truth is, I've been looking for you. I've been considerably worried, so has your sister. There are some family papers to sign by the three heirs of your father's estate. They are of no importance, in fact, but everything of a

THE INNER LAW

legal nature is important to women. Where their financial interests are involved they are painfully accurate, and your sister has become already quite a woman of business. She knows exactly what her various holdings are, and she intends to look out for her best interests. She is the type of woman who will make money."

"But why were *you* worried?" Carter managed to ask.

"Well"—Farnham seemed to be selecting his words diplomatically—"you see, I could see no rational reason for your sudden disappearance. We hold large interests in common, and naturally I wanted to talk them over with you. That was one reason; the other is that I have been afraid that you were allowing yourself to become morbid over your father's death. I tried to find you in Atlanta, but failed. I went out to your uncle's, but he would tell me nothing. I'm afraid he is losing his mind. He is a walking corpse. He bluntly refused to talk of you at all, and was so silent and despondent that I hardly knew what to make of it. In a business way I wanted to see you specially."

Mechanically, and still abashed, Carter led him into a little smoking-room adjoining the foyer. "You say you wanted to—to see me, specially?" he faltered, as they sat down.

"Yes, I feel that I ought to consult with you about our railroad meeting. As a chief stockholder you must be present. It takes place next Thursday. And as I learned by accident that you were here—"

"By accident?"

"Yes; there was a slight local mention of you in one of the New Orleans papers."

"I did not see it," Carter said, suspiciously, fearfully. "When was it?"

"Yesterday. It was only a few lines which said that you had come here for local color, literary material, or something of the sort, and that you were living quietly

THE INNER LAW

at this hotel and were at work on something. I begin to think you are a real poet. You certainly are acting like a genius. I presume you have a productive spell on you just now, and while you are that way you cannot conduct yourself like a mere ordinary person."

Carter could formulate no suitable response. Automatically he took the cigar Farnham was offering him, and began to pinch off the tip, his fingers shaking. "I *have* been trying to write *some*," he managed to say, feebly. "But I am not quite as well as usual, and I—"

"You show it," Farnham interrupted, boldly, as if he had suddenly determined to speak with more candor. "You are a walking shadow of your old self, and must call a halt. There is no use beating about the bush, Carter. I am a true friend of yours, and want to prove it. I am sure you are in trouble. It may be due to your father's death, but I can't quite feel that it is wholly that. Whatever it is, I fancy it partly concerns your uncle. At least I fancy that he knows something of it. There is only one thing that seems plausible"—Farnham was smoking steadily, his shrewd eyes averted—"and, knowing the world as I flatter myself that I do, I am obliged to entertain it."

"And what is that?" Carter heard himself asking in a tone which quite confessed his dejection.

"Why, there is a woman at the bottom of it. When I met you that morning at Chattanooga on your return from Cincinnati I thought you had become entangled with some one you met up there; but when I went out to your uncle's farm I changed my mind, at least in regard to the woman's place of residence."

"You changed your mind?" echoed Carter. "Then my uncle must have—"

"No, he told me nothing," Farnham broke in; "but I admit that his disturbed manner set me to thinking. Then, in driving past—you remember the cabin where

THE INNER LAW

that pretty mountain girl lived?—in driving past that cabin I noticed that it was vacant. Old Hank was at work in a field near by, and he informed me that the girl and her mother had suddenly moved away without telling any one of their intentions, so when I heard you were here light began to break. Pardon me, but you remember what I prophesied in regard to you and that very girl?"

Carter was silent. He sat with bowed head, his limp hands on his knees. Presently and in absolute despair he became confidential. In a quivering, halting voice he told his story from beginning to end, not even omitting the tragic matter his uncle had confided to him.

When he had concluded, Farnham leaned forward, smiled, and laid a would-be comforting hand on his knee. "I'm certainly glad I came to-day," he said. "You have got a brooding, morbid imagination, and you have let that crazy old man upset you frightfully. It is a shame for him to play on your emotions and sympathy as he has done. He may be suffering. Who wouldn't, living like a hermit as he does, with nothing on his mind but such horrible things as those? What a foolish idea to tell you that you must necessarily suffer exactly as he is suffering! It is all a matter of temperament. I happen to know dozens of happy married men who have forgotten scores of such natural boyish acts as you have committed. No one but a crazy lunatic would advise a person in your position to marry a girl like that one under such circumstances. Trouble? Why, yours would just begin. You'd never live it down. You'd never hold up your head afterward. Your whole life would be ruined. It is all rubbish about that sort of thing haunting a normal man's conscience. Theft, mean business conduct between men, will be remembered, and sting a fellow of principle, but that particular thing has never bothered a natural man. Why, the girl's own mother, according to your uncle, does not even raise the slightest claim against you. What

THE INNER LAW

does that prove but that the old woman knows her own blood too well to blame the man in the case? You are more fortunate than I've been once or twice. All you've got to do is simply to let the two go their way and forget them. Huh! I had to pay, and heavily, more than once."

"But I don't want to give her up. I honestly love her," Carter declared, earnestly.

"Bosh! bosh! bosh!" Farnham laughed merrily. "You think you do, but you don't. A man of your type never could love a woman after what has happened. It isn't in your nature. A butcher might, but a poet of your brand, never. I made a true prediction about you and that girl once. Let me make another?"

"What is it?" There was a rising note of relief in the subdued voice of the questioner.

"Why, you are going to be present at that railroad meeting, and you are going to have the time of your life with those jolly Yankees. They all want to meet you. They call you our poet mascot. But that is only a starter. You and I are going to do something together—something as fun-seeking bachelors, with nothing on earth to bother about."

"What is that?" Carter asked.

"It is this," Farnham returned. "You have put a flea in my ear that lately has kicked a lot. You've said so much about the delights of Europe that I want to go myself. Now that the railroad is all right, I feel like letting off steam and having a real lark. As soon as those chaps have gone away in their private cars you and I are going to accept a certain bang-up invitation."

"An invitation? Absurd."

"Yes. The Red Star Ocean Steamship Co. have offered me two of their best staterooms to Southampton. They will treat us like princes on the voyage. I'll spend two months with you over there, then I'll leave you in Paris or London to pursue your work. I'll come back home

THE INNER LAW

and plunge into mine. Your affairs—all of them—are in tiptop shape. Your agent will look after everything. If he neglects you in the slightest I'll cable you."

There was silence for a moment. Presently Carter said, "I have promised my uncle that—"

"Such a promise ought not to bind any rational man. You were not yourself when you made it; he was taking unfair advantage of you. Why, you haven't the moral right to marry that girl. You'd make her life miserable. Would that be just to her? You couldn't wholly love or respect her. At this moment you are influenced by passion and nothing else. You'd never forget that she was weak enough, as all such girls are, to— Oh, you know what I mean! If she had been a virtuous woman of your own class you would never have acted toward her as you did. You know that as well as I do. Marriage would be worse than suicide for you both."

"I think I'd better do as you say," Carter finally gave in, conscious of a sickening sensation which was like, and yet was not, relief. "Yes, I'll do as you say. I would like to have you with me in Europe. I've always wanted that."

"Well, it is settled, then," Farnham said, smiling as upon a wilful child. "Now I'm off to Savannah and Charleston to-morrow morning too early for you to be up, so I'm going to say good night now. When shall I expect you in Atlanta?"

"I'll leave here to-morrow night."

"I may count on that?"

"Yes—positively, and I am grateful to you, Charley. I was awfully, awfully upset, and—and undecided as to what I really ought to do."

"I know it, but it is all over now. Go to bed and sleep. You need rest and a free mind. Good night."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE following afternoon Carter was packing his bag in his room. He had put all his things into it, and for the first time in a month was whistling cheerfully, a fine cigar between his lips. How different was his present outlook on life from the one he had put aside! He felt as a man might who had left a dungeon and come out into sunlight. Already his health had improved. His old appetite had come back. His pride had returned. He was no longer inclined to avoid contact with the other guests in the hotel. He now wanted them to realize that he was a man of wealth and genius. He astonished the servants by lavish tips and friendly, even jocular remarks. There was a famous literary man living in the city, and he now regretted that he had not let the man know of his presence there, for he was sure the author would have called on him, and entertained him, as was his due. The scheme of his great epic began to warm his brain; two striking lines occurred to him, and he wrote them down with a real thrill of satisfaction. If he was not right in taking Farnham's advice in regard to Lydia, why this return to hope, health, and happiness? Had a man the right to destroy all his chances in life for the whimsical notion of a self-tortured, morbid recluse such as his uncle was? No, decidedly no!

At this instant he heard a rap on the door. It startled him, he knew not why. Going to the door, he opened it. It was one of the bell-boys.

"There is a gentleman down in the office who says he wants to see you," the boy announced.

THE INNER LAW

"To see me?" Vague, unaccountable fears fell upon Carter. "Where is his card?"

"He wouldn't give his name; said he wanted to see you in private. He asked if he could come up here to your room, but the clerk told him he'd have to wait down there."

"He did? Was it—the gentleman who was with me last night?"

"No, sir—not Mr. Farnham. I know him. He's gone, sir."

"What sort of man is this one? What does he look like?"

"He's an oldish-looking gentleman, sir."

"And you say he wants to come up here? You see, I haven't much time to spare. I am to take a train."

"The clerk told him that, sir, but he said he must see you right off—that it was important."

"Well, send him up." Carter left the door slightly ajar, and stood back in the center of the room. His heart seemed to cease beating. He was quivering in every limb. He knew that he was pale. What was it that he feared all at once? Who could the man be? Why had he refused to give his name? Why did he desire a private interview? Perhaps the visit concerned Lydia. Was the visitor a lawyer, an officer from the police station, a detective? Ah! perhaps Mrs. Romley was not the yielding woman Thomas Crofton had deemed her. She might have read the notice in the paper of his being in New Orleans, and some friend or relative of hers had persuaded her to defend her daughter's rights or expose the rich man who had brought about her ruin. In that case—in that case he might have to—he might have to—

The elevator stopped at that floor. A step sounded in the corridor. "That's the room, sir," he heard the bell-boy saying. "He's inside."

THE INNER LAW

There was a firm rap on the door. Carter shuddered and drew himself up.

"Come in," he called out.

The door opened. Thomas Crofton stood on the threshold, his soft, broad-brimmed hat in hand. His brow was damp with dusty perspiration. He advanced into the room with a slow, almost reluctant step. In his shadowy, shifting eyes his nephew read a doubt as to whether a hand-shake would be welcome. The old man's hand was not extended; Carter's remained hanging by his side.

"You must pardon me for coming," Thomas began, haltingly, and yet there was a ring of far-reaching determination in his voice. "I hesitated. I reflected a long time before making up my mind to make this trip."

"Well, I'm glad you came," Carter said, insincerely, not knowing what else to say. He was slightly relieved to find that the visitor was his uncle, and yet he dreaded an interview with him—he dreaded what he would now be obliged to say concerning Lydia.

"You see, you did not write me a line after you left," the old man said. "I thought that was queer, after our understanding. I thought you'd write surely after a day or so."

"I intended to, but was so busy that I neglected it," Carter faltered. "Won't you sit down?"

The old man slowly moved toward a chair. His eyes fell on the packed bag which lay open on the table; they lingered there a moment, then he sat down, crossing his legs, placing his hat in his lap and locking his slender fingers under it.

"I see you are ready to—to go somewhere," he observed. "Home, I presume?"

There was a pause. Carter moved nearer to the window and stood in the fuller light of the sinking sun which fell

THE INNER LAW

over the dun roofs and smoked chimneys of the adjoining houses.

"Yes; I am taking the next train for Atlanta."

"I see. Then you have—so far, you have accomplished nothing?"

"I have not been able to find them." Carter had no sooner spoken than he felt that he had been guilty of cowardly evasion, and yet he let his words stand.

"I thought it might be hard to find them in such a large city," Thomas went on, "especially as they are, no doubt, staying close indoors wherever they are. It was because of that that I came down to help you. I happened to find out from the station agent at home that they did, after all, leave an address to which they wished their things shipped. Mrs. Romley, it seems, begged him not to reveal it, but when I assured him that I wished to befriend a good woman who had been a faithful servant to me he gave in. I have the address written down here." Thomas now got up, took from his coat pocket a slip of paper, and extended it to his nephew.

Automatically Carter took it and read the penciled words. His eyes, beneath frowning brows, remained fixed upon them. His hand shook, and the paper, suddenly released, fluttered down to the floor. He bent and picked it up, almost toppling forward as he did so. Why could he not be firm and frank with this simple old man? Why was he making a bad matter worse by this delay and childish subterfuge?

"I've been thinking over it all, uncle, and—" he finally began, but that was as far as he went.

"I was afraid you might hesitate," the old man said, quietly, "and I admit that was another reason that I had for coming. There must be no hesitation in a matter as grave and all-important as this. My boy, my boy, if you could only, only understand the situation as I do, you'd never have delayed a minute. Listen to me. God

THE INNER LAW

is giving you a last chance to redeem yourself and remain a *man*. That poor girl is there at that address. Go to her now. Come with me. We'll go together."

"Uncle, I can't!"

"You can't?"

"No, I can't—I simply can't! I did not know what I was doing when I promised you what I did that night. For God's sake pity me—be reasonable! Put yourself in my place—in the place you were in as a young man. You say you had no advice. Even if you had been advised just as you are advising me you'd have been as weak as I am. I can't do it. I simply can't. The cost is too great. I am not built for the shame and humiliation that would follow."

"Farnham was here yesterday," the old man said, bitterly. "*He* is your present adviser. You have placed your soul in the hands of that adroit tool of Iniquity. I can't give you over to the same long, pitiless remorse that has been mine and still is mine. It seems to me, my boy, my boy"—the old man's voice broke, a sob struggled up in his dry throat, and tears sprang into his eyes—"it seems to me that the very spirit of your dead mother, now awake to the meaning of the Great Mystery of the life eternal, is pleading with me at this moment to save you from actual crime. It seems to me that the spirit of my wife and the spirit of my poor, wronged son are anxiously waiting for me to influence you. Me—me! It may be an insane idea, but the chance seems to be given to *me* to gain pardon and peace through you. Only the deepest suffering can give one a knowledge of the infinite laws which control the unseen. Farnham is a poor, blind, money-seeking fool. Material laws are for the guidance of the blind who have to feel their way from object to object. Spiritual laws are for those who see with the eyes of the soul. Hell itself is piling mountains in your path, but you must scale them."

THE INNER LAW

"It is all well enough to talk," the young man said, bluntly defiant. "I know myself now better than I did when you last spoke to me. I am only a frail human being. The thing you demand of me was not demanded of my grandfather or of my father for their youthful errors. They lived their lives through in some shape or other, and they were as—as guilty as I am. You feel as you do because you've lived your life and have nothing left to lean upon."

"Ah, I know, I know!" Thomas lowered his head and moaned. "So you won't do it—you won't?"

"No; I can't. That is final. I don't want to pain you, but I must refuse. Please don't mention it again. Please, please don't! I have some rights left, and I must stand on them. I haven't the remorse you seem to be under; perhaps I may never have it."

"So you think to-day, my boy, but your time will come." The old man's eyes were on the packed bag on the table. "May I ask what your immediate plans are?"

Reluctantly and all but coldly Carter informed him of his decision to go abroad with Farnham. He noticed a necktie which he had left on the bureau, and he picked it up, folded it with undue care, and put it into the bag. He took it out and placed it beneath one of his shirts. Then he began to examine the straps and buckles on the bag, and, taking a bunch of keys from his pocket, he put one of them into the brass lock and tested it by clicking the tiny steel bolt back and forth.

"Ah, you are going to Europe!" he heard the old man sigh. "At least I did not have *that* distraction, nor the means to obtain it. Besides, you remember, my marriage was approaching. I won't say anything against your trip, since all hope of the other course is now gone. You will have the advantage of being able to put the poor girl out of your sight. You may in time expatriate your-

THE INNER LAW

self. I will prophesy nothing more as to your future. You are in God's hands—and Farnham's. If you don't mind I'll go back to Atlanta with you. I'd like to help Lydia and her mother in some material way, but they would not accept anything. I may, myself, never see them again, and it may be as well for me not to do so. See? I'm shirking, too. I ought to stand by them as a near blood relation of yours, anyway; but I can do nothing. Mrs. Romley appreciates some things I've done for her, and she is now trying to save me from embarrassment. She wants to bury her daughter's shame among total strangers. I shall let her do so, in her own way. But you have not said whether my company will be welcome to you on the train back?"

"Of course I want you," Carter answered, flushing more deeply. "How can you put it that way?"

"Then I'll wait for you down-stairs," the old man said.

Finding himself alone in the room, Carter sat down on the bed. A desperate glare was in his eyes. Presently he shuddered.

"My God!" he cried. "Uncle has given me up in despair. He was right, and I am wrong—wrong—wrong! O God! how can I leave her, never to see her again? I love her—I love her. I'll never love any one else on earth. She was made for me, and I for her. My God! What ails me? I do not know my own mind. I'm lost. She'll hate me. Eventually she will marry another man, and he'll hold her in his arms; he'll kiss her lips and she'll—she'll—" He groaned aloud, and, springing to his feet, he closed his bag, took his hat, and started for the door. "What's the use?" he muttered in his throat. "There is no other way!"

PART II

CHAPTER I

CARTER'S long life abroad, which had begun so gaily in the company of his friend Farnham, gradually lost its novelty as the years passed. He finally settled permanently in Paris, where he had a luxurious and artistic apartment in which he entertained men and women of wealth, talent, and distinction. He was always thinking that he would go back to America; he was always finding, when the appointed time arrived, that he simply did not want to go. He had come to think that America was hopelessly crude—in its lack of art and literature, for its vulgar, money-getting passion, but above all for its narrow puritanical views of morality.

He failed in his poetic aspirations. His offerings to the English and American magazines were declined so repeatedly that he finally ceased to hope that his work would ever be accepted. At his own expense he printed a sumptuous volume in a limited edition, which he autographed and distributed to personal friends, but there was little in this to satisfy the old creative longing, for even his friends had scant praise for the book. He could never forget the reception it had received from an aged English philosopher to whom he had presented it after having met and chatted with the man at the house of a common friend.

"I haven't had time to read all of it," the man said, coldly, "and, frankly, I would not finish it if I could. It seems to me to have come from a man whose soul is dead, or dying. You have tried in it to glorify evil. Great

THE INNER LAW

poems come from live souls full of longing to comprehend the vast meaning of life, not out of vain, blustering denial of all that is good. Pardon me, but your book is an insult to my intelligence and ideas of ordinary decency."

So after that venture he wrote no more. In the beginning of his life abroad he had sought artistic and literary companionship, but now he began to shun it. No successful book or poem wholly pleased him. That the public liked a thing proved its inherent weakness. The modern decadent writers, essayists, and poets pleased him best, but he shunned personal contact with them because of their failure to recognize him as one of them.

He next busied himself with fads. He made collections of curios and editions of rare books. At one time, while living in London, he took up the study of the genealogy of his family. He conceived the idea that the first Crofton to settle in Virginia was a younger son of an English earl. Two years were spent in this vapid research, during which time he associated by choice with men and women of title or of ancient lineage. He had the means to entertain such people lavishly, and a few noblemen who were broken down in fortune hung around him. There was an ancient family by his own name living in Devonshire, in a fine old mansion which had been owned by a certain branch of the Crofton family over four hundred years. It pleased him to claim without proof of any sort that his own direct ancestors had lived there, and that the family coat of arms was also his. He sought an invitation to the house, by an adroit letter addressed to the gentleman who had inherited the estate, in which he spoke of the strong likelihood of his relationship, only to get in return a coldly polite and evasive note. This did not deter him, however, from claiming the relationship, and he spoke of it to his friends on all occasions. He was fond of refuting the charge that there were no persons of gentle birth in the United States. Younger sons even

THE INNER LAW

of royal descent had settled in Virginia, as had his own ancestor. Of course, there had been settlers of the lowest order, convicts, and the like, and it behooved every American gentleman to establish his rights in justice to his posterity. For this reason he got together the material for a book which he published under the title of *The Croftons of England and Virginia*. There was no sale for the work, but he had the satisfaction of having it accepted by the genealogical departments of several public libraries in England and America.

When he reached the age of forty he began to think seriously of marriage, late as it was. There was some unconquerable instinct within him which was constantly crying out for fatherhood. He wanted children, especially a son to bear his name. The sight of younger men than himself in the company of their wives and children rebuked him constantly. Something kept whispering to him that it was his own misspent early life that had robbed him and was still robbing him of this natural joy, as well as the love and sympathy of a good wife. These reflections finally became almost a monomania with him. He had the means with which to bring up a family and own an establishment in approved style, and he must set about the matter in proper form and without delay. He had not forgotten Lydia. Indeed, that beautiful first love of his was almost constantly in his thoughts. He was always comparing other women with her; he was always wondering how time had served her, or, indeed, if she were still alive. But those memories were too painful to be entertained, and he began deliberately to try to banish them.

He had met a young lady, Miss Edith Caruthers, an orphan daughter of an English gentleman who had died in poverty. She was living in Paris, where she was teaching English to the children of a wealthy French Academician, in whose drawing-rooms Crofton had met

THE INNER LAW

her. He called upon her many times. She seemed to like him, their tastes were similar, and the thought of marrying her took hold of him and grew day by day. She had a brother, who was without any fortune and was, in fact, only a clerk in a London bank, still his name and his sister's were recorded in Burke's *Landed Gentry*, and there was a possibility of his coming into a great landed property, so Crofton told himself that a wife of that sort would be very suitable, and such a sensible marriage on his part would show all his friends that he was by no means a fortune-hunter.

Notwithstanding these things, however, he hesitated many months. Why he could not ask her to marry him and be done with it became a psychological problem to him which caused him much uneasiness. His reason told him that a poor girl who was earning her own living as Edith was doing would not be apt to decline his proposal, and yet he was afraid to declare himself. She was about twenty-seven years of age, and was not considered good-looking; in fact, her features were rather plain, and she bore herself somewhat too stiffly to be graceful, but she was very intelligent, well-informed, well-educated, and, above all, well-bred. She spoke French and German fluently, and had a fine taste for the best in literature, music, and art. She seemed to have faith in his own creative ability, and more than once had urged him to resume his literary efforts. He often caught himself observing her when she was with others. He admired the ease and skill with which she handled the most distinguished of men. At such times he was fond of picturing her as the mistress of his home, and he would actually glow with the warm sense of prospective ownership.

Still he delayed his proposal. More than once he set out to spend an evening with her, sure that he would declare himself before leaving her, only to come away without doing so. During this period of indecision his old

THE INNER LAW

habit of rigid self-analysis settled on him more firmly than ever before. He wondered—and this may have been due simply to an outraged conscience—if he had not, by that first great sin of his, by his manner of living since it was committed—killed within himself the capability of loving and respecting a wife as a man should love and respect the one woman among all women who was to be his life companion, the mother of his children. He was honest enough to admit that the fault was wholly of his own making.

About this time something occurred which drove him closer to the point of actual decision than anything else had done. Miss Caruthers was given a month's vacation, and she decided to spend it, the summer being at hand, in Geneva at a little *pension* where she had lived once before. She made no mention to him of her intention to go, and it was only by his calling at her Paris home that he discovered her absence and secured her address. He thought he understood her failure to inform him of her movements, and he liked the subtle and novel sense of pursuit which came to him with the determination to follow her.

She was well aware of the fact that he was a man who was well-to-do financially, and once or twice he had fancied that she was a little sensitive of her own shortcomings in that respect while receiving such marked attentions from him, and this he liked.

He went to Geneva on a night train, arriving at about eight o'clock in the morning. There was an invigorating quality in the crisp, cool air, and as he drove to his hotel in a cab through the quaint streets of the town he had his first view of Mount Blanc beyond the hills in the far distance. One of his most hopeful moods was on him. He was satisfied that he loved her as much as he was capable of loving any woman—that he was experiencing at least a rebirth of the romantic feeling he had had several times

THE INNER LAW

before, yet in diminishing force as his various feminine fancies had come and gone.

"At last, at last," he kept saying, without knowing that he was only fighting rising doubts and fears—"at last I am to be happily married. I'll be proud of her. What man could help it? Fate has reserved her for me. Here, in this beautiful spot, on that blue lake—perhaps this very evening, I'll ask her to be my wife. She will consent; yes, she'll consent."

That morning he sent her a message. "Dearest Edith," he wrote, "you see I've followed you. Paris was insupportable after I discovered that my one dear friend had left. When may I call?"

As he sealed the note he asked himself, with a qualm of self-suspicion: "Why did I begin so naturally, so warmly, and yet use such an equivocal term as 'dear friend'? Do I really know myself? What is wrong with me, anyway? What has ailed me all along? Am I sane? Did any other living man ever at once want to marry a woman and be afraid to do so? Why am I always thinking of my uncle, of his morbid prophecy, and of Lydia? Do I still love her? I must do so, or why can't I forget her? My uncle must have left a sort of hypnotic suggestion on me of which I am unable to rid myself. He was afraid things would go wrong with me, as they had with him. Will this marriage prove disastrous, as his was? Is this a trap through which I am to receive what he would call retribution? Am I actually losing my mind? If not, why can't I form a positive decision and abide by it? Why am I wavering like this? Why am I sure at one moment that I ought to do this thing, and the next that I ought not?"

The note he received in response to his was, he thought, unduly cold, and yet its very coldness pleased him, for he liked to feel that she was modestly avoiding him. He could come in any afternoon after three, she said, and

THE INNER LAW

that was all. He decided to call that very afternoon. Why should he wait? They were both there among strangers. What more natural than that they should be company for each other?

He spent the afternoon with her in the simple *salon* of the *pension* kept by an old German and his wife on the third floor of an apartment-house in the Quai des Eaux-Vives.

When the sun was almost down they took their chairs to the little balcony which overlooked the lake above the fine trees which shaded the long water-front. He was elated, happy, but he left her without declaring his intentions. He returned that evening with a bouquet of white roses which he had bought of a pretty Swiss girl at a flower-shop in the market-place. The girl had attracted him by her youthful charm and vivaciousness, and strongly reminded him of many flirtations he had had with such persons in various places. He told himself that all such frivolities must now be over. He would become the model husband that such a sterling woman as Edith Caruthers deserved. He would respect her too much to deceive her in the slightest thing.

Again she met him still behind the inexplicable veil of reserve which had been so noticeable in the afternoon. She placed the roses in a vase on the center-table of the *salon*, and thanked him almost formally. There happened to be no other boarders at the *pension*, and again they had the balcony to themselves. There was music in the Jardin Anglais, the lights of which could be seen at the end of the street, and gay singing in a *café chantant* near by. The colored lights of excursion steamboats and smaller pleasure craft shone here and there on the surface of the lake. Near the shore a tall fountain began to play, the jet and spray of which were illuminated by constantly changing colors. A soothing, restful spell was on him. Every minute he was sure that the next

THE INNER LAW

would lead him to the subject that had brought him to Geneva, and yet the minutes passed into hours and he had not yet spoken the fateful words. It was late, she playfully told him finally, and he must go. He was emboldened by this, slight as it was. He smiled and laughed defiantly.

"Do you know why I came to Geneva?" he asked.

She glanced at him in a startled way, then avoided his eyes, making no answer.

He repeated his question, leaning toward her, and taking her hand. She allowed him to hold it for a bare instant, then gently drew it away. Her face held a gravity he had never seen on it before.

"I think I do, perhaps," she said, still looking away from him.

"I came because I could not exist without your companionship," he heard himself saying. "Edith, I'm the loneliest man on earth. I have everything and nothing. I'm tired of everything in life but you. I was at the point of suicide from sheer ennui when I met you and began to hope that you would change it all. I came here to ask you to be my wife."

He heard her sigh. She still kept her face averted. "I thought so," she almost whispered. "I could see no other reason for your following me."

Silence fell between them—a silence that bore down on him, perplexed, alarmed, depressed him. Why had she answered in that way? Thousands of fears, memories, visions of faces, past forebodings, flashed before him. He broke the silence. Leaning forward, he tried to take her hand again, but she thrust it beneath the light lace wrap about her shoulders, sat erect in her chair, and sighed again.

"What is the matter?" he faltered. "Are you not going to give me my answer?"

He plainly saw her shudder. She gave him a swift

THE INNER LAW

passing scrutiny, and then her profile was all he could see of her rigid face.

"There is something you should know before making such a proposal," she muttered, clearing her voice and trying to speak steadily. "I've been afraid you'd come to me like this, and— I didn't openly encourage you, Carter, did I? Really, did I?"

"No!" he gasped, now clutched by certain intangible fears which could have found root in no other brain than his. "What—what is it, Edith?"

"There is something you should know about—me, about an early love-affair of mine," she went on, still in low, halting tones. "There are men—Englishmen, at least—to whom I'd not feel obligated to say this, but certain remarks you have made on various occasions make me feel that—that I ought not to be your wife without making a complete revelation of—of my whole life."

Therewith, and gaining a grim sort of courage as she proceeded, she told him of her love as a girl for a certain young English officer, a most unhappily married man for whom she had had great sympathy, and who had died shortly afterward.

"Is *that* all?" he asked, in great relief. "Surely you are making a mountain out of a molehill. I could hardly expect to meet a girl anywhere who has not had *some* sort of fancy or other. I am not the only man in the world."

"You must understand me *fully*," she said, her lips pressed tightly together, her fine face pale and rigid as stone.

"Fully—oh, you can't mean—?" he went no further, for she had risen and was moving toward the *salon*.

"Yes, I mean *that*," she answered. "For ten years I've both regretted it and been proud of it. Before God I regarded him as my husband. I know my own worth, and I could not marry a man who failed to understand

THE INNER LAW

my act, and me as well. I am lonely, too. I know the manner of life you have led, and the contemplation of it in a man whom I admire for many good qualities has sickened me at heart, and yet I feel that I can help you as you can help me. I feel that you are now inclined toward better things. You have reached the point in life where a turning must be made. I know that I can help you, but not if you doubt me for one instant or hold against me the fault I am voluntarily confessing."

He was pale, cold from head to foot, and quivering in every limb. He started to speak—to say he knew not what in his awful perturbation, but she checked him with a quick, firm wave of the hand.

"Not a word now. You must—you, of all men, Carter, must think this over. You are a vacillating man, and I will not have you decide under an impulse. Come to see me Thursday evening—this is Tuesday. Come then and let me know how you feel about it. Now, good night, Yes, yes, I insist upon it—good night."

He was trying feebly to detain her, but she passed into the *salon*, walked swiftly through it, and disappeared in the direction of her bedchamber.

He took his hat from the piano and went down the stairs to the street. He was unconscious of the existence of his material body. It seemed to him that he was simply an entity of mind and soul blown along by the surging winds of sheer chaos. He was stunned, shocked, bewildered. He passed the *café chantant* where merry-makers at little tables on the sidewalk were tinkling their glasses and shouting, and went on into the Jardin Anglais. He found a seat in a retired spot and sank into it, but he was too restless to bear the inactivity of sitting still, so he went out of the garden and crossed the bridge over the Rhône to his hotel.

CHAPTER II

ALONE in his room, he began to prepare for bed, but as he doffed his garments one by one, threw himself down, and saw his stark limbs against the white sheets, the gruesome picture came to him of an undertaker dressing his body for burial. What was left for him now? It was wise of Edith Caruthers to dismiss him with the problem to solve. The horror which was sucking the life-blood from the veins of his scant manhood would have been visible to her in another moment, and she would have despised him as she would have done already had she known him as he was.

Two days to decide a thing of that sort! It would take a lifetime for a man of his stamp, a man rendered incapable of justice by a thousand unjust deeds. He extinguished the gas, groaned aloud, and lay with his eyes open in the dark. His uncle's grim experiences and warnings came to him, as they had through all the years of his expatriation, but never with such sinister force as now. He had gone through that spiritual struggle in New Orleans and refused to take the course advised by a man beaten to earth by conscience. That sin against poor Lydia was irretrievable, but should he take an unfair course again? Was not this opportunity laid upon him by God Himself?

"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," he quoted. How could he expect the longed-for content and peace if he held the rod of condemnation over the gentle woman who had so frankly

THE INNER LAW

revealed the one mistake of her life, which was pardonable if the smallest of his deeds was pardonable? He told himself that there was nothing for him to do but to overlook it, forget it, and he would; yes, he would! He would hasten to her in the morning and laugh about the whole matter. They would be married and be happy. With this thought he grew calmer, and finally dropped to sleep.

He waked the next morning with a headache. His mouth had a disagreeable taste, as if his food had not properly digested. He rang for his breakfast to be brought; but when it came and was put on the table by his bed, he had little appetite for it. He began to dress for his visit to Edith. But why, he asked himself, was he still so cheerless, so despondent? Did ever a man go to see the woman he was to marry in such an incongruous mood? He was wealthy; he was not hopelessly old; women by the hundreds could be met who would accept him as a husband; he was not even in love, actually, passionately in love, and yet he was about to select a fallen woman for his bride. *A fallen woman!* How preposterous! How far from his long-pursued ideal! And yet how, under the laws of the universe, was it to be avoided if his soul was to be freed from its self-welded, time-strengthened shackles?

Yes, he must take a just course, now. He must do the manly thing. He would go to Edith at once. He would laugh her fears to scorn. He would promise never to think of the thing which disturbed her. *Never think of it?* Would that be possible in *his* case? Could a man whose life had been steeped in lust condone even a touch of it in the woman who was to be his wife? Should two persons of that ilk bind themselves together for life? Could Satan devise a rarer comedy for the delectation of his gibing imps? Two criminals of opposite sexes on a holy nuptial bed! Merciful God! Thomas Crofton's

THE INNER LAW

morbid prediction was more than coming true. Remorse, as well as the unconquerable tendency to evil, was the living lees of the Crofton blood. But something must be done, and what? Ah, she had given him till Thursday to think it over. He would wait; yes, that was wise of her. She had, no doubt, thought of all these things. Perhaps her confession had come about through her own remorse, and was a supreme effort to obtain divine forgiveness. She had intimated that she was not to blame, but she *may* have been to blame. She may deliberately have tempted the unfortunate man, now dead. Of course she had not confessed all—not quite all. What discreet woman would? Still, he must not judge her if he would not be judged, and the judgment upon him had penetrated the very marrow of his bones.

He left the hotel, and, crossing the bridge to the excursion-steamboat landing, he took a ticket and went aboard. The boat was to make a circuit of the lake. Perhaps the trip would divert his mind. But he found this to be a vain hope. The passengers in their merriment, the placid Italian musicians in their quaint costumes, actually irritated him. So when a landing was made at Lausanne, for a short stop, he left the boat and, going into the town, he wandered about aimlessly, now among the peasants offering their wares in the market-place, again in the streets, seeing nothing, hearing nothing but the terrible groaning of his vacillating purpose. He told himself that if only he could have the advice of some one—any one, friend or stranger—he might be able to act upon it, for he had completely lost control of his own reasoning powers. He was an infant in the knowledge of good things, and it was a good thing which he was to do or leave undone.

Coming from a church he saw a priest. He was an old, gray-haired man with a calm, fatherly face and gentle, portly mien. Crofton looked at him wistfully, doffed his

THE INNER LAW

hat, and bowed. The priest smiled benevolently and was about to pass on, but Carter, obeying a sudden impulse, extended his hand. The priest took it and pressed it cordially.

"I've met you before?" he said, half tentatively, in French. "My eyesight is getting bad. I no longer remember faces as I once did."

"I am a stranger, Father, an American," Crofton responded. "I am quite alone, trying to pass a few days in Geneva. I come of a Protestant family, but am myself a member of no church. I am ignorant of the customs of your calling, but I couldn't, somehow, let you go by. Frankly, Father, I am in trouble—great trouble."

"Ah, I'm sorry!" the priest said. "May I ask if it is of a financial nature?"

"No, it is wholly mental—in fact, spiritual. I am afraid—I'm almost afraid, Father, that I am quite incapable of making a decision between two opposite courses, and it happens that a decision must be made at once. I have heard that confidences are held sacred by your order, and—and I am almost desperate."

"Ah, I see, I see!" They had come to a little house in a simple garden surrounded by a stone wall. "My rooms are here," the priest said. "Will you come in?"

Carter accepted, passing through the gate, a far-reaching sense of relief settling on him. The priest unlocked the door and led him into a cozy study, the walls of which were lined with books and pictures.

"Pray be seated," he said; and when the visitor had taken a chair the priest filled a glass with wine from a decanter and proffered it on a quaint little tray of carved copper.

Crofton drank it, thanked the priest, and fairly fed upon his benign countenance. "It is queer, Father," he began, tremulously, "that I should have stopped you. I've never done such a thing before—never, never before."

THE INNER LAW

"It happens to me almost every day," the priest smiled. "Oh, the world is so full of sorrow! Even our saints, our Lord Himself, suffered to the last. Why shouldn't you—why shouldn't I? Your face shows that you are not at peace. You would not need me if you were. You need not come to me, but you ought to go to God. God alone can aid you."

"Yes, yes, of course; but may I tell you my trouble?" Crofton faltered, most anxiously. "I want to tell you the whole thing. Somehow I feel impelled to do it."

The priest nodded. He lowered his head to his delicate white hand, closed his eyes, and his lips moved mutely. Crofton remained silent till the priest raised his head, then he told him the story of his life.

"Ah, ah! sad, sad!" the good man kept exclaiming as the account was being given, and when it was finally concluded he lowered his head to his hand again. There was silence for several minutes; then he said, looking straight and sympathetically at his visitor:

"It is a grave situation, but it seems to me that you are pursuing a wrong course. If the thing that you want to do were in accordance with the infinite law of spiritual harmony you would not be in such doubt as you are now in. To be frank with you, the reason you have for desiring this marriage is fundamentally a selfish one. You are trying to convince yourself that you can right a terrible wrong done to one person by avoiding the doing of a slight one to another. You are thinking of your own comfort solely—your own salvation. If the lady you wish to marry is suffering for her act, it is God's will that she should so suffer, and you likewise. The way to the Kingdom is not through social and material ease, but through self-abnegation, pain, and even agony. You are a beautiful sight to me, for you are groveling in spiritual darkness out of which you are sure to rise—not at once, perhaps, for you have not yet suffered enough.

THE INNER LAW

Now you must leave me. I've said all I can say. God bless you, my son."

Crofton returned to Geneva by the next boat. As he sat on the deck in the gentle, crisp breeze from the icy Alps he was wondering what he would say to Edith Caruthers. He couldn't tell her of the priest's advice, for he was not willing to admit his weakness in seeking it. To-morrow she would be expecting him. He would wait till then to decide what course to pursue, and at the last moment perhaps he would act upon whatever impulse came to him.

When he arrived at his hotel, a porter gave him a note. It was addressed in the handwriting of Edith Caruthers and had come that morning. He opened it nervously. It ran as follows:

"I am leaving Geneva. It should make no difference to you where I am going. I hope I shall never see you again. This must be final. If you had refused to let me leave you last night because of your faith in me it might have been different, but intuitively I read your mind and know exactly what you think. Good-by."

It was an odd psychological thing, but as he put the note into his pocket he was conscious of a throbbing sense of relief, and as he lighted a cigar and began to smoke he planned his return to Paris. Surely he would find something there to divert him, some new face or fresh emotion which would help him to forget what had happened. One thing, however, rankled, and that was the contempt he knew that Edith Caruthers had for him.

PART III

CHAPTER I

CARTER CROFTON, five years older than when we last met him in Geneva, was returning to America. The steamer, after six days of pleasant sailing, was within sight of New York. Eager homesick voyagers were leaning on the railings and pointing out certain recognizable objects in the sky-line, the whole of which was new to Carter. The stewards were hurrying to and fro, piling up luggage for prompt handling at the pier. The pilot had come aboard. The custom-house agents were finishing their work of taking declarations in the great salon. Men and women who had been seen only in deck costumes lounging beneath rugs in steamer-chairs appeared strange to one another in street hats and clothing. It was in the early part of June, and the afternoon was warm.

Carter had made the acquaintance of no one during the voyage, and stood on the deck alone, viewing with a despondent stare, now the nearing shore, again the elated passengers around him. He had turned quite gray; his skin had a dingy, bloodless look. Some of his teeth had disappeared and artificial ones held by caps of gold on roots and snags had taken their places. There were wrinkles in his sunken cheeks and around his eyes. He had touches of rheumatism at times, which his doctor had said came from the things he ate and drank. He tried to take an interest in the aspect of the long waterfront, but couldn't do so. It all seemed an evidence of useless and hasty productivity at the cost of national refinement and artistic growth.

THE INNER LAW

What he would do when he left the ship he did not know nor care. The sight of his fellow-passengers waving their hats and handkerchiefs at the mass of expectant humanity gathered on the pier sickened him at heart, as the thought struck him that no one would be there to meet him. He was a man without a country, without a true friend. He had neglected his correspondence with his family, and had lived in all the countries of Europe a solitary life in hotels and in chambers to which few outsiders were admitted.

He fancied that he would remain a month or so in New York, and then go to Atlanta; but there was nothing inviting in either prospect. In the latter place he would have to shake hands with people who had known him as a young man, and be entertained in their homes in the old way, and this was anything but welcome. He fancied he would like New York better, for there he could live as privately as he wished.

He remained on deck till most of the voyagers had gone down the gang-plank, and then he went ashore. In the long, shedlike structure he stood listlessly watching the custom-house inspectors examine the contents of his trunks, and when the task was over he took a taxicab for his hotel.

For a while he looked at the buildings he was passing with faint surprise over their spick-and-span appearance and immense height. The women on the crowded sidewalks appeared to be inartistically dressed, compared to the Parisian styles to which his eyes had become accustomed even in the poorest of the working classes.

It was growing dark when he arrived at the hotel, and the great building was ablaze with electric light. He found several letters on business matters awaiting him; but he did not then look them over. To-morrow, he told himself, he would employ a stenographer and dictate answers to them. He went into a great glass-inclosed

THE INNER LAW

café in the center of the ground floor, which was thronged with gay diners. What a rasping twang most of their loud, insistent voices held, he thought. And for what earthly reason were their overdressed owners so terribly gay? At the moment he did not reflect that the majority of them were persons who were simply visiting the metropolis, and perhaps for the first and last time. He did not want to eat, and decided that he would wait till he felt more like it. He walked listlessly through what appeared to his jaundiced taste gaudily upholstered and tapestried corridors, Turkish smoking-room, reception-rooms, and salons. Even the bulky newspapers in the reading-room had a cheap, sensational appearance, and in the few lines he scanned on the editorial pages he detected several slangy Americanisms, expressions which had come into use since he left the country.

Leaving the hotel, he went for a walk, and soon found himself in "The Great White Way." He had seen nothing so electrically brilliant in London, Berlin, or Paris; but its effect on his high-strung nerves was anything but soothing. He passed several theaters, but the flashy, sensational bill-boards leaning in the doorways did not stir his interest. He finally selected the one he thought he would like best, and, getting into a line before the ticket-window, he secured a seat and entered. The first act of the play struck him as being unbearably crude in construction and motive, and the performers utterly hopeless. He left during the first intermission, fairly infuriated by the enthusiastic applause of the audience.

"Fools, fools!" he muttered. "They would applaud a mountain-school exhibition. No wonder the outside world is laughing at them!"

In the middle of the next block he came to the entrance of a cabaret, and, obeying a weary impulse, he went in and sat at a table and ordered a bottle of beer, which he began to drink after critically examining the foreign label

THE INNER LAW

and deciding that it had not really been bottled abroad. He believed that he was a judge of drinks, and the taste of this was flat and insipid.

There was a little stage at the end of the room, and on it stood a male monologist dressed like a Jewish clothing-dealer. Crofton tried to catch the drift of his humorous recital, but failed to fix his attention on it firmly enough to do so. Next on the bill was a French *danseuse*. He was sure he had seen her in Paris, and the idea came to him that it might gratify the girl to have the fact mentioned to her in her own tongue by a traveled stranger; but she was no longer very young, the paint and powder were fairly daubed on her face, neck, and arms, and her dress had the seedy, bedraggled look of a rented costume.

He paid for the beer, listlessly tipped the waiter, and went into the street again. It was now about eleven o'clock. He was not sleepy; he was too nervous to be sleepy, and yet he told himself there was nothing else to do but to go to bed and try to lose himself in sleep. So he went to his hotel and up to his room. Here he stood looking at his image in the big mirror on his bureau, as he took off his collar and necktie. Why of late had he come to look so much like a dying man? Why did his clothes hang as if upon a mere rack of flesh and bones? Why did the reflection of his face always horrify him? What was it that lay at the fount of those piteous, pleading eyes?

He recalled what a friend of his who was a mental scientist once told him, that the condition of the mind affected the body. The statement had clung to him and become logical enough. The friend had said that to have a healthy body the soul must be pure, have high spiritual aspirations, and be free from worry in every form.

"Free from worry!" In his case, that was out of the question. For years he had scarcely known an hour's freedom from actual carking despondency. The friend

THE INNER LAW

had told him that the mental cure for the ailment was easily demonstrable. All one had to do was to sit alone in absolute quiet and realize that he himself was not composed of matter, but was wholly spirit which should not be controlled by any material "claim." In moments of abject agony Crofton had secretly tried to follow these instructions, but never with success. His friend had told him that there was such a thing as mental suggestion, and if a man's thought or conduct had been on evil lines for a long time his whole nature would be molded in accordance with those things. Hence, if an evil-minded man would constantly insist upon and practise purity of thought he would find, through mental suggestion, that he was gradually rising from the low, material plane to a high, spiritual one which was the only eternal reality.

Crofton tried at times to direct his mind to higher things, but seldom succeeded, and now he was coming to believe that there was really such a thing as actual spiritual damnation. His uncle, now dead, had been under its spell for many years, and he himself was a living proof of it. So to-night when the return to the land of his nativity had failed to interest him, had even increased his burden, he sat down, turned off the light, and in darkness endeavored to "treat" himself silently, according to the directions of his friend. But the desired effect had never held more aloof than to-night. The roar and hum of the great city around him, the strains of music from the lower floor, the click and clash of elevator doors, the clanging of telephone and call bells, drew his mind from the placid condition into which he was trying to force it; so he finally desisted. In his pocket he carried a bottle of morphine tablets, and now and then, while too careful in their use to become a slave of the drug, and in extreme cases only, he took one to induce sleep. He dissolved a tablet in a glass of water now and swallowed it, smiling grimly at the thought that morphine could be

THE INNER LAW

more relied on, in his case, at least, than any mental attitude or modern metaphysical formula.

He went to bed and slept. He dreamt of Paris, of the Latin Quarter. He was in the company of a gay crowd of art students and their mistresses in the Café d'Harcourt. They were teasing a stranger, an American tourist who had dared to enter wearing a silk top-hat and evening clothes. There was a deafening clatter of drinking-glasses hammered on beer-wet tables, merry songs, *risqué* jests, dense cigarette-smoke. Crofton was once more an irresponsible youth, and it was all gloriously novel. A pretty young girl was selling flowers, and he bought a bouquet of roses. How strange! they were wilting, dying, turning into a wisp of brown hay such as he had seen back in the Georgia mountains.

"What is your name?" he asked her.

"Oh, you know me!" she answered, with a rasping laugh which, somehow, seemed to come from a fat Frenchman's trombone in the orchestra, and he saw her face crinkling up to that of an old hag. "I'm Lydia Romley. How small the world is! Do you know, Carter, old boy, I've been in your pocket all these years. Ha, ha!—in the corner of your pocket like a bad penny sewed in with the stitches. You can't lose me! I'm at the bottom of your subconsciousness." She was laughing now like the snarl of the kettledrum. A drunken student was dashing beer in his face, another was kicking him from behind.

"You are an interloper!" one of them was shouting. "You ravish the bodies of women and murder their souls! Get out! Get out!"

He waked—or was he fully awake? He lay with his eyes closed, trying to remember where he was. Was it Paris, Geneva, London, on shipboard? No, it was America. He was home again. Sick of soul, weary of life, and yet home once more.

So passed several days. He avoided the bare chance

THE INNER LAW

of meeting any one who might know him, and for that reason he rambled through the crowded East Side streets, walking, walking all day long, simply that he might be so fatigued that he would sleep without recourse to his vaguely dreaded morphine.

One day he decided suddenly that he would go to Atlanta. A will-o'-the-wisp idea had come to him that he could stop over at Washington for a week and enjoy the sights of the city, the new library of which he had heard, and a certain art-gallery. He took a midnight train and waked in Washington the next morning. But he had barely left the Pullman, and was being conducted by a porter to the waiting-room in the big station, when he decided that he did not want to stop in Washington, after all. There was nothing there for him to see, and the great, quiet town, contrasted to the metropolis, made him feel lonelier than ever. On inquiring at the Bureau of Information he found that there was a fast train leaving at three o'clock for Atlanta, and, after sending a telegram to Milicent informing her of his coming, he went out into the streets.

"Surely," he said to himself, as he started toward the Capitol, which loomed up in the distance, "I can manage to amuse myself till train-time; then night will soon come and I shall sleep till I get to Atlanta. But after I reach the place what will I do? My God! what can I do *anywhere?*"

CHAPTER II

HE walked along a quiet street which led gradually up Capitol Hill. As he drew near the great structure he was reminded of a trip he had made with his cousin Tom to Washington on their way to college. What a gay time they had had! They had jested with policemen, to whom they had pretended that they had lost their way, and with the importunate professional guides, to whom they pretended, with the blindest of faces, that they could not understand English. And Tom was dead; he had been dead a great many years as the outcome of his awful tragedy. Yes, both Tom and his father were dead and out of it all, while he remained, a haunted soul in a tottering, withering body. What was coming to him—what? If merry, jovial, innocent Tom had suffered agony and death by his own hand, what might not lie ahead of his surviving comrade?

On his left he descried the library, and was going toward it when he saw a lady in front of him pause to ask a man the direction to Pennsylvania Avenue.

"I'm sorry, madam," the man answered, "but I'm a stranger here," and, tipping his hat, he walked on.

"I think I can help you," Crofton said, stepping forward. "It lies down this way." He indicated the direction by a movement of his hand, and then his eyes met those of the lady. She was staring at him as if astonished, even alarmed.

"Oh!" he heard her exclaim. "Oh!"

Crofton stood speechless with wonder. Surely he had

THE INNER LAW

seen somewhere those sweet hazel eyes, that tender, appealing mouth, the light golden-brown hair, the shapely form, and perfect facial lines.

"Surely it can't be," he began, and paused, for she had turned her head away, her gloved hand to her lips. She was quite pale and he saw that she was trembling.

"Lydia, Lydia!" he muttered; "it must be you—it *is* you!"

She kept her face averted for a moment, then she turned toward him. He saw that she was growing calmer. Her wonderful eyes seemed to hold some grimly set purpose.

"Yes, it is I," she said. "I didn't count upon ever seeing you again. I saw a statement in a Southern paper ten years ago that you were living permanently abroad. I—I was glad to hear it, for—for of course, I— But you understand—surely you do?"

"Yes, yes," he gasped. "Oh, Lydia, Lydia! if you only knew how I have suffered, how I am suffering now, surely you—"

"Suffered?" she broke in, suppressing a little incredulous laugh. "What, *you?*"

"Yes. Let me tell you. I—"

"No, no, no! You must not!" The words rippled quickly from her tongue. She stood erect, her eyes full of angry fire. "This meeting is offensive to me. I've prayed that it should never come about. You don't understand—you could *never* understand. I am not what I used to be. My great sorrow and trouble—the awful blight on my girlhood—awakened me to life as it really is. I fought my battles. I worked, toiled, studied, read, and have become what I am. I can't tell you my history. You have no right to know it, but I respect myself. We are strangers—we must remain such. At last God has given me contentment, happiness, faith in myself and in Him. We must part here and now, never to meet again—never!"

THE INNER LAW

"Oh, I see." And to his surprise a strange, unexpected pang went through him at the thought. "You are—are married, and—"

"No, it isn't that!" she corrected. "Ah, you think that of me, I see! You think I've hidden the truth from some good man and become a wife to him without revealing my past. I could have married a dozen times, but refused. I wanted to be independent, and I am so. I'm living under another name. I'm supposed to be a widow. I have a right to practise that deception."

"Yes, of course," he returned, lamely, a hungry, defeated stare fixed upon her unrelenting features. "I am aware, Lydia, that I can never be pardoned. You hate me—you hate me. I know it because—I hate myself. I am in despair. Life has no interest for me. I am at the end of my resources. I'd rather be dead than alive."

"I can see it all written in your worn face," she said, with a little reflective shake of her head. "I did not dream that you were like this, and yet I might have known it, for you had, I remember, redeeming spiritual qualities, and it is the spiritually inclined who suffer from remorse, and it *was* remorse—it must have been that."

"It is worse than remorse," he cried. "Lydia, have mercy on me. I am sinking into hell itself. You are the only one who can hold out a saving hand. I've never, since I saw you, been drawn in actual love to any living woman. The passion I had for you, away back there, must have been real—the one reality of my misguided life, and as I stand here with you now I feel that with you and your forgiveness—"

"You forget—you forget!" she cried out, sharply, even indignantly. "If you could look back on what I've been through you'd see how utterly futile your suggestion is. Why, all these years I've been schooling myself to absolute contempt of you! At this moment I shrink from you,

THE INNER LAW

Perhaps you understand me well enough to respect me a little now, but that is because you've never once thought of me during all those years in Europe, while it has been my life's aim to get the—the awful stain of you out of my being. Ah, but I really ought not to complain, for that very disaster, sickening as it is to think of, has actually lifted me to a plane unreachable in any other way. You yourself taught me to read—the books and helping hands God cast in my way did the rest."

"There is nothing I can say, then—nothing!" he groaned, softly.

"No, no; it would do no good at all," she said, looking up at the sun, and then at a tiny gold watch on her soft, pink wrist. "We must not meet again. I do not live here; I'll say that much. I am only passing through Washington on business. I earn my own living, you see."

For an instant it was as if she were about to give him her hand, but instead she used it in raising her sunshade.

"Oh, Lydia, Lydia," he cried out, "think, think! Don't go like this! You are too kind and good to—"

"No, I can't explain," she interrupted, firmly, her lips drawn tight, the lips which now seemed sweeter and more beautiful than ever before, "but you may as well know this: there is an obstacle to our being known even as old acquaintances—a most serious obstacle."

"Ah, I see. You love some one else. I deserve it—I deserve it. I've lost you, that's all; I've lost you, and that is to be my punishment."

She took a step away from him, her eyes cast thoughtfully on the wide, shaded avenue leading down the hill in the direction of the Washington Monument, which pierced a mass of fleecy clouds.

"It is nothing to me what you think," she said, with a proud curl to her lip, "but, nevertheless, your supposition is untrue. Now, I am going."

THE INNER LAW

Without glancing back she moved away. He hesitated for a moment, then hastily followed till he was once more by her side.

"Don't, don't!" he pleaded. "One moment, Lydia, please, please!"

She paused and turned a sensitive face and twitching mouth toward him. "What is it?" she asked in the voice which had once been so musical to him, and was now, in its tone of reproach, more so than ever. "I can't remain here longer—I must go. I am leaving the city to-day."

"So am I," he said, huskily, hastily, hardly knowing what it was that he wanted still to plead. Then the thought came. His voice shook and his eyes were full of agony as he went on: "Lydia, I am still a man of means. Everything else has left me but my money. That has even increased. I have no use for it. Away back there I did not have the courage, the manhood to offer to aid you after deserting you when you were my wife in the sight of God, but now—now I—"

"Do you think I need your money?" she cried, in withering scorn. "Great heavens! can you so little understand me? Don't I know that it is the same paltry stuff that enticed you into cowardly dishonor along with your puny pride? When I knew you, you were a *man*. If you hadn't been I, ignorant and young as I was, would not have trusted you. You had a living soul then—a soul full of wonderful beauty and high aspirations. I saw it then—it was that which attracted me. It is dead now. It *is*; it *is*; your soul is *dead*! My poverty was my salvation, while your wealth has held you down. If I cared for your welfare I'd beg you to give it away—throw it away! It is trash!"

He was not comprehending the full depth of her philosophical remark; he was thinking only of the widening chasm between them.

THE INNER LAW

"Lydia, Lydia, don't go yet—not yet!" he cried, for she was turning away. "I'll do anything in the world you advise, but don't leave me. Let me know where you live—where I may write to you. I can't stand this parting. Look at me, pity me! For God's sake pity me! Not in a thousand years could I tell you what I have become—what I have sunken to."

He thought he saw a soft light dawn in her eyes, but it was only a flash; it was gone in a moment.

"You don't know what you are asking," she said, sternly. "I can't make you see the utter impossibility of what you wish without telling you certain things which I don't want you ever to know. Do you understand? Things you *shall not* know. I wonder if I can put it strongly enough to convince you, force you to desist, and let me remain out of your life for ever and make you stay out of mine. Carter Crofton, I am so situated—so situated that I would rather be slowly tortured to death a hundred times than have my—my friends know that I ever knew you. Is that plain enough?"

He uttered a deep groan. "Then—then it *is* final?" he gasped.

"Yes, it is final."

"There are so many things I want to ask," he faltered. "Your mother—is she—"

"She died five years ago. God helped me to help her. By my sole efforts I lifted her out of the life of toil you saw her in. She lived for fifteen years in ease and comfort. She shielded me from the world's contempt. In the strange places we lived in she kept my secret. She was a wonderful woman. She was uneducated, but she had the finest character I ever knew. She never told me till shortly before her death that her ancestors had been people of high position in England. The revelation did me no harm; in fact, it encouraged me to strive hard to rise and overcome my obstacles. You can't imagine what

THE INNER LAW

I've been through—you shall never know; but it is over now and I am happy, or was till—till now. I don't know what the promise of such a man as you are may or may not amount to, but if I could get you to promise never to seek me, never to mention my name to a living soul, I'd feel safer in parting from you."

He was silent for a moment, for a group of sight-seers was passing, accompanied by a talkative guide.

"Oh, Lydia, you don't know what you are asking! I feel for the first time in years that a bare chance of redemption is given me—through you. I want to atone. I want to live *for* you (pardon me) and *with* you, at least with you under my eyes and care, so that—"

"Stop and be done with it!" she cried out, sharply, even angrily. "I've said it was impossible. Listen, and have the decency to promise what I ask. I can't explain fully, but to accept you as—even as a *friend*, I'd have to be humiliated again as badly, if not worse than I was before. Yes, yes, it would be even worse. I stood that, but I couldn't stand this. I'd rather have my heart torn out. Tell me, do you promise? I've not asked anything else of you. Will you grant me this?"

"Yes," he said, with a sigh which was all but a moan, "I promise, Lydia, I promise."

"Thank you. Good-by," she said; and, turning, she left him standing in the shadow of the Capitol's dome.

He watched her as she went down the great, wide flight of steps. He even followed her with his despondent eyes till she had reached the Avenue. He saw her signal a cab with her sunshade. The cab turned in to the edge of the sidewalk, and she got inside and was lost to his view.

CHAPTER III

HE arrived in Atlanta the next morning at eight o'clock. He half expected Milicent to meet him with a carriage, but as she did not do so, he went up in a cab. The city had changed greatly. There were many tall new office buildings, and other modern improvements. He was surprised at the metropolitan air of the place. The electric cars had a new look; they followed one another in quick succession, and, early as it was, were crowded with passengers.

The thing which was changed least of all was the old homestead which Milicent, who had never married, owned and occupied.

When she met him at the door he thought that she was not very greatly altered. Her hair was only slightly touched with gray; her complexion had a healthful look, and there were few lines in her face. She kissed him rather formally, and then held him from her, studying his features with an expression of surprise in her eyes.

"You don't look well," she said, rather bluntly. "Why didn't you write me that you were under the weather?"

"I'm not really unwell," he tried to explain; "but I presume I am tired by travel. I know I look older, of course. I am aging rather fast. It runs in the family, don't you think so?"

She made no direct answer, but led him into the parlor. How antiquated and forlorn it appeared to him, for it was the same furniture which he had seen as a child!

"I've kept breakfast for you," she said. "Run up to your old room and hurry right down. You will find

THE INNER LAW

everything there exactly as it used to be. People say I'm a fool for keeping this old ruin of a place, but it is rising in value. I am not spending much money; you will find that out. I don't believe in it. I keep only one servant, and a cheap one at that. I do most of the work myself. It is good for me."

He found her at her old place at the end of the long mahogany table which he remembered so well. Here also few changes had been made. He noted nothing except a new portrait of his father beside that of his mother over the mantelpiece, and recalled that Milicent had allowed him to pay for it.

"Now you will want to know the family news first, of course," she began, as she poured his coffee. "I have never been able to understand—now I am not scolding—why you have written so seldom and why you have never shown any interest in us at all. Even when I wrote you of uncle's death you made no response."

"There was nothing to say," he answered, somewhat awkwardly. "He was very old, you know. I presume he remained a recluse to the end?"

"Yes; he didn't encourage me to visit him, so I ceased to go, and as for him, I can't remember his coming to Atlanta even once after you left. I heard that his finances were low. When Henry lost all he had speculating so wildly, and was bothering me for money, which, of course, I couldn't let him have to throw away as he had his own, uncle borrowed money and let him have it. That was not all. Now I never wrote you this, for I saw there was no use to bother you with disagreeable news, but I'll tell you now, for you really must know how Henry is situated. He got into serious trouble. I don't know what it was, exactly, but it was something about a check Henry had given at a bank when he had no funds there. Henry was arrested and would have been sent to jail, but uncle made the loss good and he was released."

THE INNER LAW

"And when uncle died he left him the farm?" Carter said. "I think you wrote me that."

"Yes; it was a silly thing to do, but he left him everything he had out there—the farm, horses and cattle and run-down implements."

"A pretty farmer Henry must be," Carter smiled. "How does the place look?"

"I don't know. I have not been there for years and years, and shall not go again. I went once and was insulted."

"Insulted?" Carter exclaimed.

"Yes, it was equal to that. Henry is living there with a woman who is not his wife, a most wretched-looking, half-educated creature. Uncle took them in. The two were starving somewhere, and he took pity on them. She was the wife of a mountain farmer who left her husband and ran off with Henry. Together the two nursed uncle in his last illness, and were with him at the end. It must have been a queer household. I am sure the decent people in the neighborhood don't call on her. I did not know the woman was there, and when I went out Henry expected me to sit at the table with her. I left on the first train. He was furious and swore at me. Oh, you wouldn't know him; he has changed frightfully. He has lost every bit of his old swaggering pride. He wears rags and mopes about the place, pretending to be busy with his crops, and never accomplishing anything. It made me sick, actually sick, to think he was my brother. I was haunted by the memory of it so that I hardly slept for a month afterward. Carter, something is wrong with us Croftons. I'm leading a lonely life; some persons say that I'm stingy, but I don't think it is stinginess to look out for one's interests. Uncle was a hermit; Henry is a dwindling human wreck, and you are a dissatisfied wanderer on the face of the earth."

With a slow nod he agreed with her. "I'm going out

THE INNER LAW

to see Henry," he sighed. "I wonder— Do you happen to know how uncle died? I mean—was he conscious up to the end? Did he have anything to say?"

"I don't know," Milicent replied. "Henry was angry at me and did not even write me that uncle was not expected to live. In fact, I did not hear of his death till I saw an account of it in the papers. Yes, I suppose you ought to go out to see Henry, but he will want money, and I know he cannot give you good security."

"Do you think he is in need?"

"Yes. He tried several times to get your address before he stopped coming to Atlanta, but I wouldn't give it to him. I knew he would bother you incessantly. Once I thought I'd warn you to look out for him, but I decided not to do so."

"Is Charley Farnham in Atlanta?" Carter asked.

"Oh yes. You wouldn't know him, he is so fat and gross-looking. He is still making money. He invested in real estate before the boom, and the railroad has paid both of you, he tells me."

"Yes, it has done quite well. Charley is happy in his marriage, I think you wrote me."

"I presume so. She is a plain, unpretentious little woman from Cleveland, Ohio. She had quite a snug little fortune, I've heard. She was an only daughter of some wealthy railroad man. She doesn't care a thing for dress, doesn't take to Southern customs—is one of those women who think it is wrong to wear corsets. She seems to live only for the children."

"They have more than one?"

"Oh yes, two fine boys of fourteen and sixteen, and a girl of twelve, quite a pretty little thing. Charley takes great pride in them—indulges them frightfully and spends too much money on them. He knows I was expecting you. I 'phoned him yesterday. He will be around to see you to-day sure."

CHAPTER IV

MILICENT'S prediction was fulfilled. Carter was seated on the front veranda after breakfast when Farnham rode up to the gate in a fine automobile driven by a skilled colored chauffeur. Farnham alighted carefully, for he was quite heavy. He opened the gate slowly, and with a ponderous tread entered, waving his hand merrily as he caught the eye of his friend, who was standing on the step waiting for him.

"Commong voo, porty voo, mon ammy?" he laughed. "How did you ever leave gay Paree to come to this hole in the ground?" He was now extending his fat hand toward Carter's thin, nervous one. "Don't pull me up the steps. I've got to be careful in my old age. If I stumbled and fell I might break a blood-vessel. Gracious! *you* are as thin as a match. The doctor says I must play golf and get some of this meat off of my bones or I'll go out like a flash when I'm least expecting it."

"You *have* taken on weight," Carter said. "That is something I can't do, try as I will."

"Well, well, you've changed, too." Farnham was staring in frank surprise into his friend's face and sweeping him from head to foot with a critical scrutiny. "Gee! you are as gray as a badger and have some crow's-feet. I haven't any white hairs, but I'm as bald as an egg. Look!" He removed his straw hat and displayed a perfectly bare pate which he gingerly stroked with his pudgy pink hand.

"Come into the house," Crofton said. "There is not,

THE INNER LAW

so much glare there." And he led the way into the parlor.

"Really, I can't see how Milicent stands this stuffy old joint," Farnham remarked. "It would give me the all-overs. Everybody that can afford it is building up-to-date houses, and she has plenty of money, the Lord knows. As for business, she is the keenest trader for a woman that I ever saw. You must see my home. If there is a modern, up-to-date wrinkle or improvement I haven't got I'll put it in in twenty-four hours. I guess my *garage* alone is as big as this house. My caretaker and his family live on the second floor of it. I'd call it a lodge if I was a blawsted Englishman like the chap that entertained us at the Savage Club and talked poetry to you. What a funny bloke he was! Lord! I've thought of those gay old days a thousand times and told things we did over there. It is the place to enjoy money in, beyond a doubt. I've both envied you and been sorry for you."

"Sorry for me?" Carter exclaimed.

"Well, yes. You see, I know it is all right just for a trip of a month or so, but as a steady diet give me my old stamping-ground here in the sunny South, where folks are just plain folks and niggers are niggers. Then I reckon if I'd been living over there I'd have been like you and never married, and you may say what you please, Carter, but marriage is as necessary to the rounding out of a man's life as food, clothes, and money."

"You think that, do you?"

"Oh yes, and I ought to know. I gave the thing a lot of consideration. I thought more about it on the ship coming home after I left you than I ever had before. You see, I was getting along in years even then, and—well, I actually worried over it. I tussled with the problem for five years after that. The truth is, I wanted children. Funny to hear me say that, isn't it? But I did. I got so I wanted the darn little brats in my arms,

THE INNER LAW

and sometimes picked up babies, where nobody knew me; and hugged them."

"It seems to be a natural human instinct," Carter returned, with a frown of which he was not conscious. "And so you finally decided to marry?"

"Yes, and, indirectly, at least, *you* had something to do with it."

"I? I don't understand."

"Well, perhaps I ought not to have said *you*, for maybe it was more your uncle than you. Now I think of it, it was both of you put together. It was that awful story of his life and what he tried so hard to get you to do. The whole blame thing stuck to me, it did—not while we were kicking up such high jinks in Europe together, but after I got home. You see, I began to wonder if the old man was right in—well, in what he was afraid would happen to you if you didn't take action in that matter. I don't bother much about—well, about things concerning what you might call the conscience, but somehow my mind stuck to that thing a lot. I met him out on his farm once or twice—maybe three times, altogether, and while I never let him know, of course, that I knew about his trouble or yours, still it made me watch him and set me to thinking about myself."

"About yourself?"

"Yes, it was strange, but I admit it worried me. I remember asking myself one day, after I saw him pass with his old white head down, looking so gloomy—I asked myself what would he say to me if he knew exactly how I'd lived, and the answer was that he'd advise me just as strongly as he did you to turn over a new leaf and make amends before it was too late."

"Before it was too late?"

"Yes. I seemed to feel, somehow, that if I'd cut out the old way of living, turn over a new leaf, and actually pin it down by straight conduct from that time on, I would

THE INNER LAW

come out right in the end. The first thing I did was to quit drinking so much. Next I cut out poker and fast society generally. I quit giving big dinners, and—you may laugh, but I stopped flirting with other men's wives. I went about the whole thing in a thorough, business-like way. I had determined to get married, you see, and knew if I got the right sort of woman I'd have to find her in a different sort of circle. At last I met her. I seemed to know intuitively on the spot, the day her father introduced us, that she and I would hit it off. I give you my word, old chap, that I have never regretted it a minute. She has a long business head on shoulders which she got from that Yankee dad of hers, and has made a model mother to three of the finest kids you ever saw in a bunch. Say, you must see them, Carter. They are all at St. Simon's Island for sea-bathing, just now, but when they get back I'll have you out on a visit. Oh, I'm a regular fool about my family! I miss them now frightfully. I am living at the club while they are away, simply because I can't stand the sight of that big, empty house without them. When they were little things I used to leave the office early just to go out home and romp about with them. Huh! I've been down on my all-fours on the floor or grass with them on my back like a horse many a time, and have kept it up till my spine was bent and knees ached. Oh, I've had my share of trouble with them, too! They've been sick, and met with the usual accidents, and I've lost sleep on account of it all; but it is worth it. I reckon you've given up all idea of marrying by this time?"

"Yes." Carter tried to smile. "I'm too old now."

"I guess you *have* passed the limit," Farnham agreed, candidly. "A bachelor of long standing has habits which he can't easily twist into shape with domestic life. I just did escape, you see. Maybe I would have been too old as it was if I hadn't been so tired of living in clubs and

THE INNER LAW

hotels that home life appealed to me as a novelty. Of course, there are things I have to remember that I'd like to forget—things that stick, somehow. I wonder if you are like me in that respect."

"I suppose all men are more or less alike in that, way," Carter answered, evasively, his brow corrugated, a vague shadow in his eyes.

"I've often wondered—that is, I've thought, owing to your uncle's making so damned much ado over that particular girl, that perhaps you have wondered what ever became of her."

Carter started. His face became rigid. His lips quivered. "I have not allowed my mind to dwell on it. I—I don't like to think of it. It is all past and gone. Let us not talk about it."

"All right, but I fancy you may have let it bother you some, and it strikes me that I may be able to relieve your mind a little bit, in one way, at least, for I guess you would like to know that she is well and doing well."

"Do you mean that you have seen her?"

"Yes, I think so—that is, if I am right in a certain supposition. I am almost sure that I saw her about five years ago. I started to write to you, and then decided I would not stir up such an old matter—besides, as I say, I was not *absolutely* sure."

"Where did you—think you saw her?" Carter's voice, to his own ears, had a hollow sound. "Of course, of course, I'd like to hear anything about her—*anything*."

"It happened like this," Farnham began, "and I wish I could be absolutely sure it was she. I can't give you any more than my impression at the time. I was in St. Louis on railroad business when I was taken down with a sharp pain in my right side. A doctor I sent for to come to my room in the hotel said he was afraid I had acute appendicitis, and advised my going to a private hospital at once. I was taken there, and Dr. Ansley, the famous

THE INNER LAW

St. Louis specialist, was called. It was appendicitis, and I was operated on. I came through it all right, and a day or so afterward, for some unknown reason, a new nurse had to be assigned. Dr. Ansley told me that he had sent for a Mrs. Somebody—I can't recall the name, though I have tried often to do so. He said she was the most wonderful woman he had ever met, and that he was sure I would like her. I flatter myself that I know men pretty well, and I made up my mind, from his talk, even before I saw the woman, that Ansley, being a sedate bachelor, was in love with her, and when I finally did see her I was certain of it. I was quite surprised when she came, for I was almost sure that I had seen her somewhere before. She was beautiful—beautiful! and had a wonderfully sweet and appealing way about her. She bent down, spoke to me, and something in her soft, mellow voice reminded me of that mountain girl away back in Georgia. I said nothing, but during the next day, not being permitted to talk, I lay and studied her. Dr. Ansley came oftener than was necessary, and I soon saw that it was to see her more than me. I could see that she was treating him with dignified reserve, and that he was making every possible effort to win her regard. Then something happened which made me almost positive that I was right in thinking she and your old friend were one and the same, but, mind you, I say *almost* positive, for, after all, there may have been some other reason for the way she acted."

"Acted about what?"

"Why, it was like this: On the morning I was allowed to talk for the first time, she bent over me and among other questions she asked me my name, saying that the doctor had failed to mention it and that she must enter it on her chart. I gave it to her in full. With that she started, and it seemed to me that she actually turned pale as she stood and studied my features excitedly.

THE INNER LAW

“‘You are Southern, are you not?’ she asked in a shaky sort of voice, and when I told her I was from Atlanta she tightened her lips and turned suddenly away. She was writing on her chart, I think, behind a screen at a little table, and I could not see her face. In fact, she left the room with her face turned aside, as if she did not want me to look at her. And that was not all. She put an assistant in her place at once and left the hospital. I inquired, but no one could tell me anything about her. I might never have heard anything but for Dr. Ansley. He came that night and seemed very much disturbed. He told the nurse who was on duty to leave the room, and then he began asking me adroit questions, and making hints that I could not catch the drift of. But presently, as if irritated with me, he came out bluntly and wanted to know frankly if I had said anything to offend the nurse who had left. I assured him that I had not, to my knowledge, and he seemed to believe me. He was so much upset by what had happened that he refused to obey a call which came to him, and remained with me. He finally—and you know only a man desperately interested in a woman would do such a thing with a comparative stranger such as I was—he told me frankly that his future happiness was tied up in her. He said that he had admired her from the moment he met her on an important case in Philadelphia six months before, and that he had induced her to come to St. Louis to attend some important cases with him. She had never told him where she was from, but from her accent he supposed she was a Southerner. She never spoke of herself or her family except to say that she was a widow who had had sad experiences which she wanted to forget. I suppose Ansley took the interest I secretly had in her for sympathy with him in his love-affair, for the next day he brought the matter up again, and he did so every day of my convalescence. He said he could not understand

THE INNER LAW

why she had quit the case, for she would make no explanation at all. Then came a further surprise. I was about to leave the hospital when Ansley came, looking awfully depressed. At first he had nothing to say, then he fairly broke down. Strong man though he was, he couldn't hide his feelings.

"‘I've lost her,' he said. ‘I've lost all I care for in the world, or ever can care for!’

"Then he went on to say that he had called on her and proposed marriage, and that she had not only refused to be his wife, but had quickly and mysteriously left the city, leaving only a short note to him in which she begged him never to try to find her. I was sorry for the fellow, for he was one of the finest men I ever met. I was sure that I had it in my power to explain much to him; but, of course, could not tell what I knew about the poor woman. Do you think, Carter, that I was right in my supposition? Could this beautiful woman be the girl I saw away back there that day?"

Crofton had turned his face aside; he said nothing for a moment, then he looked up. "I am sure it was she," he admitted. "In fact, I am positive of it." Haltingly, and with many sensitive reservations, he recounted his meeting with Lydia in Washington.

"That settles it," Farnham said. "She was dodging you just as she dodged me, and as she perhaps dodges everybody in any way connected with her past. I'm sorry for you, Carter, for I see that you are worked up over it. However, it ought to be a satisfaction to you to know that she is doing so well. Ansley told me that she had a very wealthy clientele, that she was called only on important cases, made a great deal of money, and—that brings up another thing about her which he admired so much. He said she seemed utterly to despise money, and gave away all her earnings to unfortunate persons, particularly poor, struggling girls in the big cities. After

THE INNER LAW

all, I don't see why you need be so troubled over it. She certainly is better off than when you knew her in her rags in that log cabin."

"I ruined her life," Crofton broke in, desperately. "Wonderful woman that she is—strong, brave, intellectual, beautiful—I sent her adrift ashamed to own her name, without a tie, without a friend, a poor, gentle outcast, fighting the world, while I—while I, my God! Farnham—while I was dawdling my damned life away in Europe and growing sick from the very stench of my putrifying soul. I tell you, Farnham, that my uncle was right in what he feared for me. There is such a thing as actual foreboding of future events. He saw, from his own experience, what was coming to me, and tried his best to avert it. Note how similar our cases have been. The wreck of his every hope and entire life followed that one particular act of his. Has not just as great misfortune befallen me? In a million years I could not explain the constant agony I am in. Day by day it increases, grows thicker, blacker, clutches me tighter. I am in hell every waking moment of my existence. I try this; I test that; I go here; I go there; but nothing gives me relief. I thought perhaps my return home might divert my mind, but here in America has fallen the greatest blow of all. Incredible as it may seem to you or any other man, yet I now know that I love Lydia Romley—love her—love her more desperately than a man ever loved a woman before. God has *made* me love her, as He made my uncle love his son, that I might be hated by her in the end, as my uncle was hated in their last conscious moments by his only child and adored wife. Don't think I'm crazy. I am not. I am in full possession of all my reasoning powers. Look at me if you want to see a proof of hell made visible to human eyes. The physical flames the ancients talked about would be balm contrasted to the remorseful fires raging within me. I am using my uncle's

THE INNER LAW

words—his very words, but they are the only ones that half express my feelings.”

Farnham, with a startled look of concern on his stolid face, rose and put his hand on the bowed head of his friend. “I must go now,” he said. “You must not keep this up, Carter. You’ll go crazy, if you do. You are not well. Your restless, irregular habits have upset your liver. You will be all right after a few days of rest. I’ll bring my car around in the morning—I have an appointment this afternoon—and we’ll take a spin around town and meet some of your old friends. You must not cry over spilt milk. What is done is done, and brooding over it won’t help a bit. I’ve done a few things in my life which I’d rather undo, but I don’t let them get on my nerves. Life is too short and there is too much to be doing. I presume it is that blasted artistic temperament which you have to an abnormal degree. I can see now that your uncle was right in wanting you to marry the girl, and of course I was wrong in advising you as I did; but I was guided by the best light I had at the time. Of course, if I had dreamt that she would turn out to be the woman she now seems to be, I would have taken a different view. I was judging her by her sordid surroundings. She must have good blood in her veins away back somewhere. Now get your mind off this thing. Good-by. I’ll see you to-morrow.”

CHAPTER V

ONE day, after a week spent in Atlanta, a week of social torture rather than pleasure, Carter decided to surprise his brother with a visit, so he took the train to Benton, intending to walk out to Henry's farm if there was no conveyance at the station. The train arrived there at eleven o'clock in the morning. It was a fine, cool day for midsummer, and the altitude of the place gave additional crispness to the air. The village seemed to have changed very slightly. It was no larger than it was when Carter had last seen it. At the edge of the platform stood a rather ramshackle "hack," or cab, drawn by a thin horse in the care of a negro driver holding a worn whip and wearing a slouch-hat on his kinky head.

"Do you know where Mr. Henry Crofton lives?" Carter asked, approaching him, bag in hand, after the train had gone on.

"Yas, suh; yas, suh. You mean de ol' Tom Crofton farm. I know it pow'ful well."

"Henry Crofton is my brother," Carter explained. "I want to go out to see him. Will you take me?"

"Yas, suh; yas, suh. Jump in. I know de way—been over de road mo' times 'n I got fingers en toes. En you is Mr. Henry's brother? Well, well! Folks say—I hear um say—dat you never was gwine ter come back ter dis here country no mo'."

Crofton ignored this tentative comment as he seated himself in the vehicle and saw the negro mount the front seat and place his bag beside him,

THE INNER LAW

"I hain't seed Mr. Henry fer mo' er mont' now," the negro pursued, whipping his horse into a slow trot along the red-clay road. "I reckon he ain't able ter git about much now."

"You mean that he is sick?" Carter asked.

"I don't know dat he is ter say actually flat o' his back in bed, suh; but I think he is some wuss'n he was. He cert'ney is po'ly. In de spring he used ter come here ter Benton ter see Dr. Manson fer treatment, but he hain't been here fer er long time now. I hear um all say Mr. Henry got kidney trouble, en dat he cayn't nacherly expect ter las' long, but he cert'ney holds on. I hear um all say he's down one week en on his feet de nex'. De trouble wid him is dat he hain't got no mo' money ter buy medicine en treatment wid. Doctors dese days won't credit nobody, white ur black, en Mr. Henry done spent all he ever had flyin' round. Folks say he was powerful rich 't one time."

Crofton did not encourage the driver to talk further. What he had heard depressed him, and this depression seemed to be increased by the bare, sterile lands through which the rugged road passed, the decaying rail fences on either side, the cabins of logs, the grain-cribs of pine poles, and other signs of poverty. Now and then they met a farmer on a wagon of wood, lumber, or produce, or passed women and boys plowing or hoeing, barefooted and half-clad, in the fields. The placid contentment mirrored in their simple faces sent shafts of vague self-accusation to the tired world-wanderer. What would he not give to be like them? he asked himself over and over. They had only to toil in the open air and sunshine by day, eat bread earned by the honest sweat of the brow, and sleep like tired children at night—their debt to the law of life fully paid. Such persons, he told himself, could meet grief, misfortune—death itself—with the equanimity of a faith incomprehensible by any process of intellectual reasoning.

THE INNER LAW

Presently they reached the vicinity of Mrs. Romley's cabin. There was only a little curve in the road to make and the spot would be in sight. Carter stopped the driver, telling him he would get out and walk, and asking him to drive on and wait at the farm-house gate with his bag.

Finding himself free from observation, Carter made a short cut through the bushes till he came in view of the cabin. It was unoccupied, and surrounded by a riotous growth of weeds and tall, blooming sunflowers. The crude, wooden-hinged door-shutter had fallen inward. The upper half of the mud-and-stick chimney had toppled down. The plastering of clay between the logs had been washed away by the rain. The well-curbing had disappeared, and branches of trees and old rails had been thrown over the opening to prevent accidents to straying hogs or cattle. He walked into the cabin, the rotting planks of the floor breaking beneath his feet, and with a sinking heart looked about him. There in that sordid room he had actually overpowered the helpless girl whom he now loved and knew to be his superior. There in the corner, filled with cobwebs and the refuse of rats and mice, the crude bed had stood—that bed which had been stamped on his brain during all those years of reckless living and vain seeking of pleasure. He went to the door and looked out toward his brother's house. How could he go on and attend to that dismal duty in his present frame of mind? What was the use to live, anyway? He put his hand into the pocket of his coat and felt the bottle containing the morphine tablets. He took it out and rattled the contents.

"Enough to put me to sleep for ever!" he muttered; "and what more appropriate spot could be found than this?"

A shudder ran through him, leaving him cold from head to foot. No, he could not do it—not yet, anyway, for there might be something beyond. He half believed

THE INNER LAW

there was, for if he couldn't kill consciousness now, if he couldn't kill memory now, how could it ever be done? Yes, he was afraid—frankly afraid. His uncle must have been afraid, too—afraid to meet the outraged spirits of his son and his wife, if not to see the face of an offended God.

Putting the bottle back into his pocket, he stepped down into the yard and plunged through the weeds toward the farm-house. He found the cabman waiting at the gate, and dismissed him. Taking his bag, he entered and started toward the house. Upon everything in sight lay ruin and desolation. The once beautiful lawn where he and his cousin Tom had played ball, tennis, and croquet with the young people of the neighborhood was literally a thicket of bushes and vines through which only a narrow foot-path led to the porch steps. The fences, summer-house, and rustic seats were gone, having been used for firewood by the careless inmates of the house or rotted on the dank ground. The green blinds to the windows had disappeared, the small panes of glass were broken, the paint had been washed from the weatherboarding. A few chickens and ducks stalked and waddled about an unclean yard in the rear.

As he put his foot on the lower step of the porch he felt the board give beneath his weight, and he stepped upon the remaining ones with care as he ascended. The door was closed; there was no sign of human life about the place. Taking hold of the loose brass handle of the old bell, Carter drew it toward him, hearing the dismal ring far back in the house.

Presently the door was opened by a slatternly, middle-aged woman who was barefooted and wore a soiled gingham dress. She shrank in evident surprise at the sight of a well-dressed stranger, her pale-blue eyes rolling helplessly.

"Is Mr. Crofton at home?" Carter asked.

THE INNER LAW

Turning her head, the scant yellow hair of which was fastened in a tight, unbecoming knot behind, she glanced through the cheerless, empty hall toward a closed door in the rear. "Yes; he is lying down," she said.

"I'd like to see him. You may tell him, if you please, that it is his brother."

The woman flushed deeply, dropped her eyes, and wiped her trembling red hands on her ragged apron. "You say you are—are—" She went no further. He saw that she was greatly excited, pale splotches appearing in her red cheeks.

"Yes, I'm his brother Carter. I've just got back from Europe."

She left him standing in the doorway and hastily sham-bled along the hall to a bedroom and entered. It was the room he had once occupied. Carter heard low voices, one of which he recognized as Henry's. He couldn't hear the words that were spoken, but there was a note of petulant complaint in the masculine voice. Was it possible that this dejected-looking woman was his brother's mistress? he asked himself, gloomily. It must be so, he thought; and this, then, was the last of the gallant, devil-may-care Henry's conquests, a woman who had left her husband and home for this. He saw her returning. She was still frightened and abashed.

"He says come in," she faltered. "He's in bed."

There were no curtains or blinds to the windows of the room, no rugs or carpet on the floor, and no furniture except the bed in one corner and a table and two chairs near it. On a soiled mattress, his head slightly raised by a ragged pillow, lay the sick man. And as he looked upon him Carter was conscious of the sudden reflection that not a single recognizable feature remained in the greenish-pale mask of skin drawn over the facial bones. The iron-gray beard was long and tangled, and the thin hair of the head was only a scant fringe to a withered bald pate. Henry

THE INNER LAW

turned on his side with evident difficulty, and held out a thin hand the nails of which had not been cared for.

"How are you, Cart?" he smiled in a ghastly way, displaying his brown, broken teeth. "Saw in the paper you were back. Thought you never would land on this side of the water again. You certainly find me down, old boy. I happen to be a little bit worse right now than usual. I'm generally able to potter about my farm a little, but for the last week I've been unable to walk at all. Marty, give him a seat."

"I am sorry to see you ill," Carter answered, lamely, and found himself unable to say more. Henry's failure to introduce the woman was significant and confirmed his first impression.

Lifting a water-pail from one of the chairs and wiping it with a towel, the woman placed it near the bed, and Carter sat down, a desolate chill creeping over him. The whole thing seemed a terrible nightmare. Was it possible that he himself had been living like a prince abroad while his only brother lay dying like a beast in a stall?

"I thought you might write a fellow a line now and then, once in a great while; but you never did," Henry complained. "I'd have written to you—by George! I reckon I'd have boned you for the loan of a few dollars to tide me over this present trouble, but I didn't know how to reach you. Farnham made some fool excuse or other when I mentioned it to him one day, and Milicent—well, I've cut *her* clean off my list. I'd see her dead and in her box before I'd ask a favor of her, even a little one like that. But, Lord! times are hard; they surely are, Cart! Not like the old days when we children had the old man's keen brain to supply us with pocket change. But I reckon I ought not to complain—I am the black sheep of the lot, the bad egg, and always was. You held on to what was left you, and added to it, and Milly she's done well with her part. But, Lord! I wouldn't have the

THE INNER LAW

heart that's in that woman for worlds. But I won't talk about her. It makes me mad even to hear her name mentioned. You must pay us a visit, old chap. Uncle's old room has a bed in it, and we can give you some plain country cooking. Marty"—here Henry's stare became unsteady—"is a good plain cook. Our pantry isn't exactly overloaded with the fat of the land, but we can manage somehow. You used to like young frying chickens and fresh eggs, and we've got plenty of them, and good butter and milk. Our cow has just had a calf and is in a fine condition, pasture-grazed."

The bare thought of being a guest in such a place was most repellent to Carter, and yet he knew there was nothing for him to do but to accept the invitation, for a few days, anyway.

"I came to stay awhile," he said, "though I had no idea you were—under the weather like this. I suppose you have a doctor?"

"A sort of makeshift, Dr. Manson," Henry sneered. "I don't like him, and he doesn't like me. He is as stingy and grasping as Milly, or any other miser. I owe him a little back pay, you see, and he treats me like a pauper. As soon as he found out I hadn't any more money, had mortgaged my farm up to the hilt, and owed a few bills here and there, he quit calling regularly. He was here yesterday, though, and the day before, and said he would come back to-day. I can't see why he is coming so often *now* when he neglected me so much a month ago. If I didn't know Milly so well I'd think maybe she had heard I was down and agreed to pay him. Say, you haven't been to him, have you, Cart?"

"No; I don't know him," Carter answered, "but I want to pay him for you, and I will do it gladly. In fact, anything you need I shall get at once. You must let me advance you some money, Henry."

"Do you really mean that, old boy?" The wasted

THE INNER LAW

features were working under stress of rising emotion. "Marty, did you hear that? Did you hear what he said?"

The woman had turned her perturbed face toward the window. A mumbling, unintelligible sound came from her lips, and the visitor saw her untidy head nodding.

"It is good of you, Cart, old boy," the sick man faltered, his voice catching in his throat like that of a happy child. "You came just in time, so you did. Well, you won't lose by it—I don't somehow believe that a fellow ever loses by extending a helping hand to another—and then, after all, you and I were born from the same parents. La! doesn't it seem a long, long time since we were kids in that fine old house, wearing nice nifty clothes, with all those servants at our beck and call? I sometimes look back and wonder, wonder, wonder. Even Milly, snarling old maid as she now is, was—well, she was a sweet, gentle sort of a girl. When she was about eighteen I remember I was awfully proud of her. Nobody ever would have thought then that she'd turn out to be a regular old hag hoarding a pile of gold in a big, empty house, and as hard as flint against the unfortunate ones of her own sex. Oh, I'll tell you about that—I'll tell you about the way she treated Marty."

At this juncture the woman at the foot of the bed muttered something indistinctly and stalked from the room.

"She didn't want to hear it," Henry said, his eyes dumbly following the woman and remaining for a moment on the door which had closed behind her. "Marty has got a great big heart in her, Cart. She holds out all right at times, and then again she breaks down all of a sudden. She may hold in now because she has to fix up for you, and the best thing for her is to be busy. I've found that out. Of course, you know, or you can guess, Cart, that she and I are not, to say—exactly, married?"

Carter nodded. "I thought that might be the case,"

THE INNER LAW

he said, as gently as he knew how to speak. "I had never heard of your marrying any one else, and naturally—"

"Well, never mind," Henry broke in, almost peevishly, "there is *some* justification for the whole thing—*some* for *her*, anyway. You know me, Cart; you know how I was all along with women. Well, I'm not sure but old age and ill health were the only things that forced me to call a halt, even one like this. But now I'm going to be pretty frank. Out of all the affairs I was mixed up in, the one with Marty bothered me the most. I met her over the other side of the mountain and made love to her away back when she was a bright, happy young girl. I didn't do anything wrong then—I swear it, Cart—I swear it to you as a man. It may be because I didn't have just the opportunity, but I did make love to her, and I got her to love me. Then I went off and left her.

"A young farmer wanted her to marry him. He was honest, upright, a hard worker, and steady. Her mother and father wanted her to take him, and they browbeat her, argued with her, and threatened till finally they got her to marry the fellow. I happened to go back near her home about five years after she was married and accidentally met her. Oh, well, Cart, I may as well tell it all; she was still good-looking, in love with me even more than she had been, and I was just a natural man. She sneaked out and met me often. She simply couldn't stand her husband—said she felt like screaming when he laid his hands on her or when she had to be alone with him, and I found that I liked her more than any other woman I'd ever been intimate with.

"I'd come here to live with Uncle Tom, and she came crying one day and begged me to stick to her—said she had left her home and was staying with a cousin, a lonely widow, near us. She declared she would drown herself if I left her—that she never loved anybody else, and

THE INNER LAW

didn't care what happened if her life had to go on like it was.

"I went to see her husband to tell him I was ready to marry her if he would let her have a divorce. I expected to be shot, but it didn't matter to me. I'd just lost my last dollar in cotton-futures, and didn't care a rap whether I lived or died. The fellow happened not to be the shooting sort. He was of the old-fashioned, rigid, religious order. He was as white as a sheet and leaned back in his hard, cold sanctimony and told me Marty could do as she liked with me; but he would do his duty to God. He believed divorce was an unpardonable sin, and he wouldn't get one himself nor allow her to have one. Said he would take her back any time, but that was all he would do.

"Well, Uncle Tom got it all out of me. He wormed it out of me one night when he and I were together. I expected him to kick me out of the house, but he didn't. In fact, he acted awfully queer, I thought, for in his way he was religious, too. Poor old man! He kept shaking his head and sighing while I was talking, and he was never in his life so gentle with me as he was that night. He treated her nice, too, and she was astonished as much as I was, if not more. She had come over one day to see me and was out at the barn, crying at a terrible rate. He saw her and came out and talked good and kind to her. By George! it was a pretty sight! He put his old arm around her and petted her and did his best to comfort her. He went to see her husband, too, but could do nothing with him. Then what did I do? What do you suppose I did, Cart? I rented a little cottage half a mile down the road, bought a little furniture with some money uncle let me have, and Marty and I moved in. You may think I acted wrongly, considering public opinion, but that was all that was left for me to do, and I was plumb fagged out and wanted peace and quiet and

THE INNER LAW

home comfort. Of course, none of the neighbors would come about us—they cut us dead; but we were happy. Her husband moved away to escape the talk, I reckon, and we were not bothered by the sight of him, and uncle—say, Cart, he acted *white*; that's the word, '*white*.' He used to come over of an evening and sit and smoke his pipe and talk to us in his slow, simple way. It was always about religion, and God, and forgiveness, and redemption, and being sorry for this, and atoning for that. I swear, with his long white beard and hair he looked like one of the saintly old patriarchs of biblical days. Marty and I hardly knew what he was talking about half the time, but we humored him by listening. He fed us—he was hard run himself, but he fed us, and used to call us his children, and it was funny; but every time he'd come he'd apologize in the meekest way and smile wistfully and say he knew we did not want 'Old Gandpa' there. I remember one night, when we were all three seated in the moonlight in front of the little house, that some mention of Marty's husband was made, and uncle fancied she was a little bit worried over treating him bad, and so he set in to comfort her. I wish I had written down in black and white what he said. I'd certainly read it over, now that he is dead and gone. Lord! that talk was beautiful! It set Marty to crying, I remember, and it was all I could do to hold in, though I didn't exactly know why.

"Well, shortly after that he was taken down so sick that he couldn't take care of himself, and we came here to live with him and nurse him. It made him happy. He said so over and over. Marty fairly worshiped him, for he was always, *always*—dying man though he was, Cart—he was always trying to keep her from feeling bad over what had happened to her.

"Then Milly heard of uncle's low condition and came. Humph! she came! She dropped down into our peace-

THE INNER LAW

ful circle one day, like some haughty, perfumed, powdered, and silk-dressed she-devil. She turned up her nose at Marty, and treated her as if she were a dog under her feet. She said a few cold words to uncle. She lectured me about the way I'd lost my part of the estate, and then whisked off to Atlanta to her damned old hermitage, where, thank God, she's been ever since. I didn't notify her when uncle died. We didn't want her about. It was all sad enough, anyway. Lord! how we missed him! He had got to be a sort of baby to me and Marty in his gentle helplessness. He never complained once; he was always the same quiet, gentle old man, constantly excusing himself for troubling us in the slightest thing we did for him. He left me the farm in his will, of course, but we missed him so much that we didn't think much about it. It was awful the way Marty took his death. She cried night and day for a month after the burial. We didn't have any service at the church, for uncle had quit going; but we had a country preacher come and say a few words and read over the coffin in the library. The room was full of *men*; not a woman came—not a damned one darkened the door. Do you know why? It was to keep from meeting Marty. The men could rub against *me*, but the women pulled their saintly skirts back from her. I was sorry for Marty, and loved and pitied her more that day than I ever had as she sat in that crowd all by herself in her black, the only female under this big roof. Both her ma and pa had died, and she hadn't shed a tear; but her heart was broke when uncle passed away. Do you know I wish—there is one thing I'd like to have, and that is I'd like to live long enough to make somebody regret my death as—as we do his. It was just his way, his character, I reckon, that makes us feel as we do about him now that he is gone for ever."

CHAPTER VI

HERE the sick man had a fit of coughing which lasted several minutes, and, glancing toward the door, Carter saw Marty silently motioning to him to come to her. He rose and went out. Seeing him coming, she turned and led him into the dining-room, where he found that she had spread a clean but ragged cloth at the end of the old mahogany table and placed some freshly cooked food upon it.

"I know you must be hungry," she said. "I hope you will excuse this poor meal."

"It is just what I like," he said in a kindly tone. He noted that she had put on her shoes and stockings and a clean apron.

She left him eating the fresh fried eggs and bacon and hot bread with cold milk. He wanted to detain her, to ask her some questions, but she was very shy, and remained out of the room till he rose from the table; then with lowered head and reluctant step, she came in to remove the few simple dishes.

"I was a little afraid," he began, "that my brother was talking longer than was good for him just now."

He saw her nod affirmatively, but she made no sound.

"It is best, I presume, not to let him get excited?" he went on, tentatively.

"Yes; the doctor said not to let him talk much," she said; "but he will talk when he gets started—nothing will stop him."

THE INNER LAW

"I wanted to ask you," Carter said, "what the doctor thinks about my brother's condition."

"He says he's dying," she answered in a low, husky voice.

"Dying?" Carter exclaimed in surprise.

The woman nodded. "Yes, he's dying. Dr. Manson says he has done all he can. Henry doesn't like him, but he has treated us fair. He told me a month ago that there wasn't the slightest hope. Henry can't keep a thing on his stomach. The doctor expects him to die every day—that's why he comes often now. He says Henry will go out like a candle—just stop breathing, and he says—he says Henry won't *suffer*. Do—do you reckon he's just talking to comfort me?"

"I—I don't really know." Carter hardly knew what he was saying. *Dying?* That one word seemed to fill his entire consciousness. Could it be possible that Henry, his only brother, the happy, rollicking playmate of the long ago, was on the brink of actual annihilation? And to go out like that—like that, in that sinister nest of tragedy! as if it were a fitting place for a Crofton to die in.

The woman had left the room with a tray of dishes. He heard her shuffling feet in the kitchen. The fear came to him that something was wrong with his own heart. He took his left wrist between the fingers of his right hand and tested his pulse, or tried to do so. It appeared to be throbbing only faintly. This was fancy, of course—the autosuggestion of an imaginative man, but it clung to him like a gruesome reality. He next fancied that he felt the germs of his brother's disease gnawing at his own kidneys. He tried to remember if the disease was contagious, but in his present agitation he could not do so. The woman returned to fold up the table-cloth, and with a flare of dumb despair in his eyes he tried to think of something to say to her. A dead man had taught him a lesson; and

THE INNER LAW

he wanted to emulate that dead man's example in his treatment of this stricken woman. He wanted her to think of him as she did of Thomas Crofton.

"I am sorry for you, Marty," he said. "I wish I could say something or do something to help you in your trouble. We must be friends"—here he thought again of his uncle, and added—"we are more than that already, though, for we are brother and sister. In God's sight we are that, you know."

He saw her start and stare with wide-open eyes, then her face began to fill with emotion; he saw her breast rise high and sink quiveringly. She started to speak, but choked up and coughed deeply in a brave effort to hide it.

"Thank you, thank you," he heard her half whisper after a moment's silence, "thank you."

"Did the doctor leave any directions which have not yet been carried out?" he asked her.

Here, with the folded cloth on her arm, she met his eyes with her own in a steady, desperate stare. "All but one thing," she blurted out. "I've tried and tried, but I can't do it. I've prayed to God to give me the strength to do it, and still I can't. I try, but I break down."

"Is it something which requires strength?" he inquired, thinking that it might perhaps pertain to the lifting of the sick man.

"No. The doctor says Henry ought to be told."

"Told? You mean—"

"Dr. Manson says somebody has got to tell Henry that there is no hope. He says if I don't he will have to do it. He is an old-fashioned doctor, and he says he considers it his religious duty not to let a dying person be ignorant of his condition. Every time he comes he asks me if I've told Henry, and yesterday he said if I hadn't told him when he got here to-day he would himself. He thinks I can do it, but I can't—I can't! Henry has no

THE INNER LAW

idea it is so bad; he thinks he'll get well. Oh, I can't tell him! I can't!"

"Perhaps I can help you," Carter plunged, impulsively. "If you want me to, I will tell him what the doctor said. I understand how you feel about it."

Marty said nothing, but he saw a surprised flare of gratitude in her dumb eyes. She left him to go to Henry, and presently tiptoed back. "He's asleep now," she whispered. "Maybe you'd like to go to your room. It is ready."

He followed her to the open door of the room, where she left him, and he entered. The first slant of the afternoon sun came in at the curtainless windows and fell on the bare floor. There were only a wash-stand, a bed, a chair, and his costly, foreign-made bag in the big room. The bag, like a traveled, isolated thing, scarred by brilliant hotel advertisements in many lands, stood in the center of the room. A yellow wasp was buzzing against a dingy pane of glass; a black, red-eyed spider watched it from its web in a corner of the mullions, perhaps alarmed at the sight of an enemy too large and desperately ruthless for prey. Why was it that Carter gently raised the sash of the window and with his handkerchief softly brushed the wasp down to the airy port of escape? Then he turned to bathe his face and hands at the wash-stand in the cooling well-water. How strange! he mused, that he should be giving attention to his mere body when the great destroyer of bodies had almost exterminated all that was left of the once gay, care-free Henry Crofton. Henry was dying, and he himself had to die. To die—what a word, what a short word to mean so much!

As he was going out he saw the doctor, a portly, gray-bearded old man, leaving the house and trudging gravely toward a buggy at the gate. Carter called to him softly, and he turned, smiled casually, and held out his hand.

"Your brother told me you were here," he said. "I

THE INNER LAW

used to know your father rather well away back just after the war. You don't resemble him much, even as he was in his younger days."

"I've been told, doctor — my brother's — companion says that you see no hope in his case," Carter said, unwilling to talk of less important matters.

"No, none at all," was the prompt reply. "No medical skill on earth could even prolong his life beyond a few days. I am doing no good at all, but my presence sometimes helps the grieving ones at such a time, and I always try to be on hand. There is another thing. I feel it to be my Christian duty, Mr. Crofton, as I think Marty has already told you, when a patient is so completely in possession of the reasoning faculties as is the case with your brother, to inform him of his fate, and I always insist upon it. She can't do it, it seems, but she says you have promised to mention it to him."

"Yes; I shall do it at once," Carter said. "It seems that he has little idea of the gravity of his condition."

"No; he is full of hope; in fact, more so since you've come than ever. Well, I'm glad you will attend to that matter. It is one thing I never leave out if I can help it. Civilization gives even condemned criminals a chance to prepare for the end. Why should a Christian physician neglect his sacred duty in that line?"

"I shall do it as well as I can," Carter promised. "I want to say, too, doctor, that I wish to pay all my brother's bills, and I will do so as soon as they are sent to me. I'm grateful to you for your attention to him."

"Oh, that's all right," the old man answered. "I don't know that I was expecting pay. I try to do my duty to humanity without thinking of what I am to get out of it. If you had not spoken of your wishes you'd never have heard from me. Good day. I may call to-morrow; but I will be of no medical service at all. His death is only a question of a very short time."

THE INNER LAW

Carter walked to the gate with him. "Do you think if I telegraphed to Atlanta for a private nurse that it would do any good at all?" he asked, anxiously.

"No; besides, you'd hardly have time to get one here, and a new face might upset him. Marty is doing all that can be done. She is suffering awfully, but she doesn't show it to him."

When the doctor had disappeared down the hot, sun-baked road, Carter went back to the house and stood on the porch, wondering what he would do next. The gloom upon him was like some palpable substance which he breathed into his lungs and admitted through the pores of his skin to every part of his body. His gay and strenuous past flitted by him like a varied panorama. What would his erstwhile friend, young Lord Colvin, or the Countess of Marlan think of him if they could see him now—or what would Lydia Romley think, say, or do? Would she gloat over it all? Would she read in his face the blended terror and remorse which was wringing the spirit-blood from his cowed and humbled soul?

A sound in the hall notified him that some one was approaching. It was Marty. She leaned against the door-frame, and with full, glistening eyes stared at him.

"Henry wants to see you," she whispered.

A strange, cool psychic wave from a mystic something hitherto unexperienced met him as he turned from the open sunlight into the shaded interior of the house and followed her to the sick-room.

"Here he is, darling," Marty said, remaining in the hall.

Henry made an effort to raise his head on his hand and elbow, as his brother entered, but with an impatient sigh he sank back on his pillow.

"Is the doctor gone?" he asked.

"Yes," Carter replied. "Is there anything I can do for you, Henry?"

THE INNER LAW

The sick man laughed harshly. "I told him I'd have money soon and would pay his dirty bill. He pretended not to care one way or another, but I'll bet he'll make it big enough when he does send it in."

"It will be all right; everything will be made all right," Carter said, clearing his throat and wondering what would be suitable for saying. There was a swarm of hungry house-flies over the bed, some on the sick man's face and hands, some on the windows and floor and ceiling. Carter felt a touch of nausea as if the food he had just eaten were kept from digestion by his perturbed state of mind.

"Well, I'll certainly be glad to be free from debt again," Henry half chuckled, "and you bet I'll stay out this time. I'll make better crops next year. I wonder if that damned old sawbones will be here again to-morrow. I don't like him. I heard him whispering to Marty out in the hall, asking her if she had told me something or other. I heard her crying and saying she hadn't, but that you were going to attend to it. Say, Cart, if you are going to pay bills for me I want to know what they are—I want to see them and check off the items. I won't be swindled or let you be, either."

"It wasn't about the bills," Carter said, lamely.

"You say it wasn't? Then what was it?"

Carter was silent. He felt the stare of the deep-sunken eyes drift to his face, though his own were directed toward the window.

"Did you hear me? What was it?"

Carter sat motionless, though he felt a veritable storm of conflicting impulses rising within him. "It was something of an unpleasant nature to us all," he began. "Marty didn't have the heart to tell you, and I thought that perhaps I—I—"

"Ah, I see!" sighed the sick man, and an oath escaped his lips. "I'll bet I know what it is. Some of my old

THE INNER LAW

devilment has cropped up. I could lay my finger on it first guess. They are going to try me for selling moonshine whisky. I know the sneaking rascal that gave me away, too. I didn't sell more than a few flasks and jugs. They can't call this house 'a blind-tiger.' I got the stuff from a fellow I knew, and kept it in the barn. Well, they may give me trouble. Uncle Sam is a hard master, but I had to have some ready money at the time, and it came easy that way, and I was accommodating the chap that made the stuff. Well, they will send me up, or stick on a heavy fine. They may even try to bleed *you*."

"It is nothing of that sort," Carter said. "Henry, the doctor thinks that you ought to be told that there is little hope of your immediate recovery, and—"

"Huh! What does he know about it?"

There was no answer. Carter detected a muffled sob at the door and understood its meaning. He continued: "Henry, the doctor thinks there is no hope—none at all. I am very, very sorry, but he thinks the—end is really only a few days off at best."

The crinkled, cavity-filled face turned on its side till the eyes of it met those of the speaker. The stare from the bed was steady and pregnant with meaning, and the silence upon which it floated so helplessly seemed to come from a sudden new conviction of the doomed man.

He sniffed defiantly, and yet his lips were quivering. "You don't believe it, do you? You wouldn't rely on the opinion of a—a green country yokel like—like—" The words trailed away into the drone of the flies against the window-panes.

Carter made no response, and this itself seemed significant to the doomed man.

"Tell me—tell me—straight out, brother to brother, Cart, old boy, do you believe him?"

"Henry, I'm afraid—I am afraid that—I do."

"You *do*? Great God! Do you *think*, as your *honest*

THE INNER LAW

opinion, Cart, that I'm going to die here, like this, and right off, with only a day or two left—me, Henry Crofton? Humph! It is ridiculous! Huh!"

Carter lowered his head and kept it down. "I wish I could help you," he answered.

There was a pause. Henry wet his dry lips with his white-coated tongue. "Humph! Humph!" He was trying to sneer again. "What does Marty think? Does she believe the damn fool knows what he is talking about?"

"I think she does, Henry."

"How do you know? Where is she? Tell her to come here."

The woman must have been listening at the door, for she came in without waiting to be summoned. She had hastily wiped her eyes, Carter knew, for damp traces of tears were on her cheeks. She stood at the foot of the bed, her back to the light, her face in the shadow.

"Marty, do you believe this fool thing the doctor says about me?"

She lowered her head. She stood still for a moment, and then a sob was wrung from her breast.

"I see you do, too." Henry turned his face from them. The bony fingers on his breast were moving like the legs of a crab. Presently they heard him say:

"Go away, both of you. I—I want to be by myself a little while. I want to—to take a nap. I—I feel sort o' drowsy. O, my God, my God! I wonder—I wonder—" The last words were uttered too softly to be heard, for Carter was following the weeping woman into the kitchen. He stood by her side. He felt as if he were drowning in a tumultuous sentient sea, and the straw he tried to grasp, for some inscrutable reason, was the forlorn creature at his side.

"He takes it hard," he heard his lips saying. "I think he is beginning now to realize it."

THE INNER LAW

"Yes, he thinks so now. Oh, Mr. Crofton, he is not *ready*. He's not—he's not *ready*!"

"You mean that he is not ready in—in a spiritual sense?" Carter floundered.

She nodded. "I've known it a long time. I've tried the best I could to get him to pray and to give up to God, as I did in my trouble, but Henry wouldn't listen; he always laughed and made fun when I read my Bible and tried to talk to him. God is good and merciful, but He turns his back on folks who won't come to Him of their own free will and accord."

The world-traveled man, the student of philosophies, the past companion of authors and thinkers of Europe, found himself unable to formulate a reply which would at once adapt itself to his reason and to his compassion for the sufferer at his side.

He was silent, but the desperate woman wanted to say more. "Henry said once that you didn't believe in the Bible, yourself," she went on, as appealingly as an anxious child, and yet with a touch of reproach. "I think it was something you said once about Tom Paine, or Darwin, or their books, that made him first laugh at religion. Mr. Crofton, listen to me. I'm just a poor, unhappy woman. I don't know much, and I haven't any proof at all, but if there is not a kind, good Heavenly Father above us, and a place of peace and rest for tired human souls like Henry's, this universe, just as it stands, is a fiendish thing that was made by a devil, and God had no hand in it. I'm giving up the body of the man that I gave up everything else for, but I won't give up his soul. My own soul won't permit it, and I believe—I want to believe, and don't doubt it till I meet somebody like you—that my soul—not my body—but my soul, is part and parcel of God's own great spirit."

"I'm sorry if it was anything that I said that caused Henry to—" Crofton began, but she broke in.

THE INNER LAW

"Oh, it may not have been you!" she corrected, quickly. "Plenty of people he knows and goes with haven't any faith. Forgive me, forgive me. I don't know what I am doing or saying to-day. It is awful, awful. I'm an out-cast. I'm a widow without a name. I'm shunned by my kind for something I couldn't help—I swear it before God's face at this minute. I couldn't help what I did. I am fighting for belief, for faith—for something to hold to. If God doesn't stand by me I'll have to kill myself—do you understand? Now you may see if there is a God. Watch me and see what will happen. When Henry's gone, who will back me if God doesn't?" With her apron to her writhing mouth she turned and left him.

CHAPTER VII

FINDING himself alone, Carter tiptoed softly into the hall and across to the library, or what was once the library. The big room contained no furniture, being quite bare save for a dusty pile of old agricultural implements on one side, a few bundles of fodder, and a dry-goods box containing shelled corn on another. He located the spot where the table had stood at which he had written part of that long-dead poem. There against the wall had stood the bookcase at which Lydia was at work when he first saw her. Lydia Romley, the ignorant mountain girl whom Fate, Time, and suffering had fashioned into the rare woman she had become. There he stood in the room in which their passion was born. The room was in ruin, as he was in ruin. But Lydia was not desperate, as he was desperate, for he had seen a permanent light in her face which had never for one moment shone in his.

Leaving the room, which was so like a sepulcher filled with accusing atoms of his decaying self, he went out and took the direction of one of his old mountain walks. The sun was going down. From the level valley below he heard the lowing of cattle, the bleating of lambs, the early supper-horn of some farmer—all just as it was in his youth. He recalled a sunset he had seen at a little inn in the Alps, and how he had lain awake that night listening to the song of a nightingale. That was when he was a lone wanderer, and he was still a lone wanderer. After Henry was buried, he told himself, he would flee

THE INNER LAW

the spot; he would go he knew not where, but he would go somewhere. He had tried in vain all his life to fly from memories, but he would try again. That was all that was left him—flight, flight!

It was growing dark when he descended to the farmhouse. A light in the kitchen told him that Marty was there, and he went around the house to the outer door. She was standing over the hot stove. She looked up, and came to him.

"How is he?" he asked. "Has he waked yet?"

"He hasn't been asleep," she answered. "He was just pretending, to mislead us. I've heard him rolling and tumbling and moaning ever since you left him. It isn't pain of the body; it is trouble of the mind. When he hears me coming he lies quiet, but when I go away he begins again. I can hear him make the slightest move in this big, still house; I've got accustomed to it. I could hear a rat gnawing a piece of wood if I was here and it was at work away out under the front porch. Your supper will be on the table in a few minutes."

"Thank you," he said. He had no appetite, but he did not want to admit it to her, for it was a sign of a weakness of which he was ashamed.

After supper was over he sat on the grass at the front door. Now and then during that dreary, monotonous hour he heard low voices from the sick-room. At eight o'clock Marty came to him to say that she was tired and would lie down by the sick man.

"If you need any assistance you must call me," he said. "How is he resting now?"

"He is not resting at all; he's still bothered," she faltered. "I don't know that we did right to tell him the truth, after all. I almost wish we hadn't done it. Doctors may know about the body, but they don't know any more about the spirit than other folks do. Good night."

She had been gone only a few minutes when he went

THE INNER LAW

to his room. He wondered if he would be able to sleep. He bethought himself of his morphine tablets, but again resisted the temptation to use them. Of late he was becoming afraid of the drug. The sleep it induced resembled death. He wondered how a photograph of himself would look if taken as he lay under its influence. He shuddered, for death now alarmed him more than ever before. He had taken the bottle from his pocket, but he thrust it back, the superstitious fear hurtling through his brain that perhaps grim, purposeful Fate had lured him there to die at the same time that Henry died, and under that tragic roof.

"What an insane idea!" he muttered. "After all, I *may* be insane, or fast becoming so. Am I acting, feeling, thinking as a rational man would under like circumstances? Father was insane at the last. Uncle may have been at one time, if not when he died. His son killed himself. Henry is not dying a natural death, and I have never been normal, and am not now. I once thought it was due to genius, but I am not a genius. Do I look like a sane man? Would a sane man have allowed his only brother, the pal of his childhood, to come to this while he was swimming in the social sewers of Europe? Would a rational man allow his brother's mistress—a woman of that stamp—to stab him through and through with her backwoods ideas of a Creator and the soul's responsibilities?"

Midnight came and passed. Still his eyes were open. He rose, groped in the dark for his coat, and began to fumble for the morphine; but again irresolution clutched him, and he sank back on the bed without touching the bottle.

At three o'clock, still unable to sleep, he crept to the door, opened it cautiously, and stood listening. Low voices came from the sick-room. He saw a slender bar of light beneath the door-shutter. It could mean nothing but that the doomed man was also unable to sleep.

THE INNER LAW

He went back to his bed and sat on its edge. How long would his torture last? Since Henry had to die, how much better it would be for it to happen without delay, so that he could go away from a spot which was pregnant with much that was so hauntingly horrible! Then suddenly he shuddered, for he had actually desired his brother's death. "O God, forgive me!" he cried, unconscious that the words were a prayer.

It was growing light in the eastern sky when he heard a step at his door. There was a cautious rap on it. He opened it and saw Marty standing back in the darkness of the hallway.

"I'm sorry to wake you," she faltered; "but Henry has been begging for you. He hasn't slept a wink. I told him I'd come and tell you."

"I'll be right in," Carter said. He dressed rapidly, pushing his feet into his shoes without putting on his stockings, and tying a handkerchief around his neck in place of a collar and cravat.

A lamp was burning on the mantelpiece. A newspaper was leaning against it to shade the bed. Henry turned his head slowly, laboriously as he entered.

"You asked for me?" Carter inquired.

The gray, cracked lips moved at first without sound, then: "Yes, Cart, I want to talk to you—or—or *somebody*. Marty"—sending his glance to the still sentinel at the foot of the bed—"would you mind leaving us two alone? We have no secrets, but—but I want to talk to—to—well, to just one at a time. I've said all I can to you, and I—I want to speak with—with my brother."

Without a word and like a shifting shadow she left the room. Carter was undecided whether to sit in the chair by the bed, or on the edge of the bed itself, where there was ample space. He felt that the relationship, the circumstances, demanded the latter, and yet his whole being shrank from close contact with the putrefying mass of

THE INNER LAW

conscious humanity which was and was not his brother. He did neither. He took the woman's place at the bed's foot, and leaned upon one of the cool, smooth posts.

"I wish I could do something for you," he managed to say, feeling that it was a useless, insincere platitude. Henry was silent for several minutes, lying with averted eyes. There might have been a frown on his brow had the flesh not been too thin to produce it.

"Cart, I've been thinking of what the doctor said. I reckon, after all, that he knows his business—I reckon I am going to die. I can see that Marty thinks so, too, and you." The glance was now full of open appeal as it went straight to the listener. "*I reckon you think so, too?*"

"I am afraid I do," Carter answered. "I'm sorry, but it is true, I suppose."

"You feel pretty sure of it, Cart, don't you?"

Carter nodded. "I suppose you may as well face the—the inevitable. It can't be avoided."

A desperate sigh flitted like a scared, invisible thing from the flat chest. The fingers of the hands were balled convulsively. "Cart, brother Carter, *I don't want to die! I don't want to—I don't want to!*"

No answer was forthcoming, though the stare of the dying man seemed to be trying to fix itself upon at least some facial response which might give hope.

"I don't want to die," Henry repeated, desperately. "I can't think of anything else to say, right now, and it can't do any good to say even *that*, but—my God! brother, what am I to do? Why, just a few hours back I had no idea that I could ever feel like this. I had no idea *any* man could feel like it. Do you hear me—*any* man? I am actually up against it. I've heard of death all my life, but I never dreamt it would be like this. I don't want to die—I don't—I don't! Say, is there absolutely *no* chance, none at all? But, oh, what is the use for me to ask such

THE INNER LAW

a foolish question? I'm all in. I've been lying here fighting it ever since the doctor left. There is nothing for me to do except to try to believe in Marty's religion. Say, Cart, I'm going to ask you what I would have been ashamed to ask a week ago. I wouldn't ask it now, but I haven't a thread of any other hope to tie to, and—I am afraid to die if—if the church folks are right about the judgment to come, and I don't want to die if I am to be blotted out of existence. I can't stand the idea of that, either, and why I don't know. Say, you've been around the world a lot, Cart. You've read the greatest books and met great thinkers and talked to them face to face. Now you can tell me, if anybody can. What is there ahead for me, for Henry Crofton as you know the man and as you see him now? Is there such a thing as God and His forgiveness, or is it all bosh pure and simple? Answer me, Cart. I'm all in; I'm plumb desperate—I've got to know *something*. Did a man called Jesus Christ ever die away back in that far-off country to save men as bad and tough as I've been? I used to believe it, in a way, when you and I were little boys and mother talked it so much, but I'm all in the dark now? I'm desperate. I've even prayed as Marty told me to—using her exact words—but nothing came of it that I could see. She says when a man is sorry for what he has done that the Lord will forgive, and she may be right—she *may* be, and the trouble with me is that I am not *actually* sorry. Maybe I'm so full of fear that I am too selfish to be sorry. Do you catch my point? As I look at her—the woman I've brought all this to, and I try to see if I am sorry about her, for instance, I find myself wondering if I really am or if I am only trying to make a deal with God in my *own* interest. The trouble is, you see, that Marty is not the *only* woman I've harmed; and—now I wouldn't have her know this, but I'd rather crawl away to some hiding-place and die alone than here under her care. It hurts me and

THE INNER LAW

makes me ashamed. I can't keep from thinking that I'm dying here like this, nursed and grieved over by a woman who never was my wife—never was the mother of my children. You see, the very bed I die on is unholy, and I am a father, Cart, who has never seen all of his own children. I turned my back on them, and now I am wanting God to turn His face to me in kindness. Think of that!"

The lips of the dying man were twitching, a dry sob hung and gurgled in his throat. He was silent for several minutes. Again Carter wondered how long it would be before the agony—his *own* agony—would be over. Surely, since Henry had to die, it would be better for the end to come at once. Again he had entertained that thought—again he was horrified by it.

"Well, well, I see you can't help me," Henry sighed. "Cart, I wish I was a Catholic. I knew a fellow—I bummed around with him a lot in Louisville ten years ago, gambling, carousing, and the like. He was one—he was a Catholic. A fellow shot him over a poker game in a bar-room, and he lay there in the bloody sawdust on the floor. It was hot and I fanned him with my hat while some of the rest ran to get a doctor and a priest. He had but one thought in his mind. He kept begging for the priest, and praying and praying that he would get there in time. It was terrible the way he went on. The doctor came and could do nothing to save him. All the time he was begging for the priest and praying out loud. Then at last the priest came and did all that to him—you know what I mean. Words don't come to me now, but the priest was bending over him, putting stuff on his brow, crossing him, and whispering and listening to what he said. He got through—the priest got through and stood up, looking contented, his face and eyes shining in a way I never have forgot.

"'You are all right now,' I heard him say, and 'Toady'—that's what we always called the fellow—said: 'Thank

THE INNER LAW

you, Father. God bless you!' And he died—Cart, he died right there in that bloody puddle with a smile on his lips like a child going to sleep watched by its mother. Now, Cart, that is what I want—something like that, but who could give it to me? There are no priests in these mountains—nothing but Protestants, and they don't believe in confessions. What am I to do—*what?*?"

Carter was unable to answer. A turgid hope crawled through his consciousness that the dying man would interpret his bowed head and silence as grief. But, after all, what could he possibly say? For was he not virtually suffering at least spiritual death himself? Yes, it was as bad as that, and he was becoming alarmed by it.

"I've told you this for a reason, Cart. I thought it out in the night. Do you reckon if I sent for the Methodist preacher, Mr. Clark, who lives half a mile up the road—if I got him here would he do, or say, anything that would help?"

"He might," Carter answered, at the end of all his resources. "Shall I go for him?"

"I wish you would, Cart," the sick man moaned. "I want to try *something*, and I can't think of anything else. But wait! Before you go I want to tell you that a year ago, with no idea of dying soon, in mind, though—in fact, I did it to spite some of these gossips around here who were turning up their noses at Marty—a year ago I made a will by which I left her this farm. Now what I want to ask is this—do you reckon it will hold good in law? There is a big debt on the place, but if it was sold at public outcry something might be left over for her—a few hundred, anyway."

"I promise you that I'll pay off the debt in full," Carter said. "Then the entire property will be wholly hers and she can live well on the income from the land. I'll give her some money, besides. I'll see that she is provided for all her life."

THE INNER LAW

"Good! good! You will do that, eh?"

"Yes, gladly."

"And—and"—a shudder convulsed the thin frame—"the ready money for—for— You know what I mean, Cart? I hate to think of it."

"I am sorry, but I do not—quite understand."

"I mean the—burial expenses. Strange how I hate to say it."

"Oh yes, I'll pay for everything. Don't worry."

"Then try to get the preacher and explain, if you can, what I want. Maybe he will understand. He is a crusty sort of a man that I've had some disputes with. Oh, Cart, Cart, I don't want to die! I don't want even to *think* about it, much less arrange for it, but I must—I must! Go get him—go get him!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE dawn was breaking when Carter went out from the house and started toward the home of the preacher. He breathed in sheer relief, and yet he knew the relief was only temporary, for he would have to go back to the harrowing scene in a few minutes. But it would all be over sooner or later, and then he would be free from the awful clutch of the thing, and he would travel—travel again, seek new scenes, fresh diversions, and forget—*forget?*

The Reverend Mr. Clark's house was a small cottage which stood at the side of the road, shaded by some apple and cherry trees. Early as it was, smoke was issuing from the chimney of the little lean-to kitchen in the rear. No one was within sight, and, passing through the gate, Carter went round the cottage to the door of the kitchen. Here a young, florid-faced woman, her hands coated with flour dough, met him, a look of surprise in her blue eyes.

"Is Mr. Clark at home?" he inquired.

"Yes; he's back at his hog-pen feeding the hogs. He'll be here in a minute. Won't you step in and sit down?"

"No, thank you; I'm in a hurry, and I'll walk back to him."

Bending over a pen made of fence-rails, a slop-pail in his hand, in a stiff white shirt, without coat, collar, or neck-tie, stood the minister, a pair of loose carpet slippers on his sockless feet. He was under thirty years of age, and yet he wore a full, glossy brown beard which gave his youthful face a look of artificial gravity. Carter intro-

THE INNER LAW

duced himself and partially explained the object of his call.

The preacher wiped his right hand on his trousers and extended it formally. "I heard you were here, Mr. Crofton," he said. "And of course I knew how bad off your brother was. The doctor told me, as he passed, but I had no idea that my services would be asked for. It certainly comes as a great surprise, for your brother is not a member of any church, and has the reputation of being a scoffer. Of course I'm willing to hold the service at our meeting-house, provided the members raise no objections. You see, Mr. Crofton, they built it with their own hands at odd times, and—and they feel a certain personal interest in it. I don't know how to explain something that will be hard to bring up to you as a brother to Mr. Crofton, but a state of affairs exists here that is complicated, to say the least that can be said. I suppose you know that—that the woman now living with your brother is not his wife?"

"Yes, I know that, but I hope at such a time that you will set that aside and—"

"I would myself—oh, I would as far as *I* am concerned; but I see you don't fully understand. We can't make human nature over—human nature is human nature, and, to be frank, your brother has been in a regular turmoil here for the last three years, criticizing these people because they don't approve of his high and mighty way of living. He has gone so far as to tell some of them to their teeth that his woman is as pure as their wives, and that they haven't a speck of religion or they wouldn't find fault with her. Why— Well, I'm going to be plainer yet. I've stopped a white-cap gang twice as they were ready to tar and feather them and ride them on a rail out of the community. Your brother was born rich and of a high family, and he has tried to ride rough-shod over a whole settlement of decent, God-fearing citizens just

THE INNER LAW

because they were poor and simple. You see the situation. Whether they would let their church-house be used in such a way I don't know. I'd have to call a meeting of leading members and put it before them."

"I don't think my brother had any church service in mind," Carter explained, awkwardly. "It was only that he thought you might say something or do something to relieve his mind. He knows he has to die, and he is very, very much depressed."

"Oh, I see! That is quite a different matter. I'll do what I can. I always do. I'll come right over as soon as I wash and fix up a bit. I reckon he's in a repentant mood, and if he is I'll do all I can, and maybe it will help him. God knows I hope so."

The sun was up when Carter got back to the farm-house. Its yellow light was sparkling in the dewdrops on the weeds and grass of the neglected lawn, giving out prismatic gleams of blue, red and gold.

Half an hour later the preacher walked in. He wore a long black frock-coat, black necktie, and his heavy new shoes creaked loudly as he crossed the porch and strode down the hall in the wake of the awed and silent Marty.

Carter was seated by the bed, and rose to give the minister his chair, while Marty, with a cowed look on her face, hastened to fetch another from the dining-room. Carter declined the chair when it came, some inner impulse causing him to plead with her to take it instead. But as she would not sit, he stood by her at the foot of the bed. He recalled being at the bedside of a dying friend, an artist in the Latin Quarter, and seeing the wife and the mistress of the man treated with equal courtesy by those who were present, and he wondered if he, himself, had become genuinely humane at bottom, or if he were merely following an example set for him by a class of people supposed to be highly cultured.

The minister stared at Henry and muttered something

THE INNER LAW

indistinctly as he sat down and crossed his legs. He drew a small, well-worn bible from his pocket and cleared his throat. He glanced about the room, then fixed his eyes on the thin countenance of the dying man and said:

"Your brother told me that you'd like to see me, Mr. Crofton. Of course this is not a time for any ill will over past differences. I have laid all those things aside, and I hope you have."

"Yes, yes; oh yes," Henry said. "I'm a dying man, Mr. Clark, and I don't know what to do about it. I'm sorry if I ever hurt your feelings. I've never been religious, and I thought that maybe you could help me in some way—in some way."

"There is only one thing that can help *anybody* at such a time, Mr. Crofton," was the perfunctory answer. "And it is very, very simple. We are told in this precious Book that Jesus came to earth and died to save all sinners. You are a sinner, and I am a sinner—all of us are sinners. All you have to do to gain pardon, to secure eternal life, is to believe on our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember the thief on the cross. That was late, as your case is late—and yet our blessed Lord practically gave him the key to heaven on the spot. If you want me to read that account I will do so, and then I would suggest a short prayer. After that I will sing a hymn that I think is a beautiful one. My voice is not good, but I'll do the best I can. We've been running a big revival over in the Cove, and I sang so much there that I'm a little hoarse; but, as I say, I'll do the best I can."

"Marty, why don't you sit down? There is a chair," Henry said, with a sudden show of irritation that was unexpected. As if she hardly knew what she was doing, the woman sank into the chair, covering her startled face with her work-reddened hands. There was silence then, broken by the harsh breathing of the sick man through his thin, fluttering nostrils.

THE INNER LAW

"Shall I begin?" The preacher looked inquiringly at Carter, ignored Marty, and then rested his eyes fixedly on the face of the dying man.

"I don't know—I really don't know," Henry sighed, wearily; and they saw him make a feeble effort to shake his head. "I don't believe it will do me any good—I don't—I don't. It might help *some* men, but it won't help *me*."

"You haven't given it a *trial*," the preacher said, testily.

"Oh, I know—I know," Henry moaned. "I don't want to hurt your feelings—I don't want to hurt the feelings of any human being alive to-day. I'm sorry we had those words over your creed and calling, but, Mr. Clark, I don't think I could bear to hear you read and pray and sing, feeling as I do. If there is a God I want *Him* to help me. If there was such a man as Jesus, and His soul is still in existence, I want *Him* to help me. I'm all tangled up with my past life, and this awful thing that has come on me—I mean death—death! I've prayed and prayed. Why, this is a prayer itself—what I am saying now is a prayer. I'm more desperate than the thief on the cross. Maybe he just stole a thing or two, but I've done a thousand wrong things—things that never could be righted. It is the thing that you can't put right that counts. I've heard my uncle Tom say that, and he was a deep thinker."

"Right there lies your trouble," the minister said, resentfully. "You say *if* there is a God—*if* Jesus ever lived. I must be plain with you, sir. God and Jesus can't and won't be interested in a man who says 'if' in the way you do. That very word shows you haven't got faith, and without faith there is no salvation for you nor any one else."

"Oh, I can't argue!" Henry wailed out, sharply. "But please don't read and sing and pray. I don't want to

THE INNER LAW

hear you. You stoned that poor, suffering woman huddled up there in that chair; you stoned her by not treating her as a lady and rising when she came in the room, and by the way your back is turned to her now. Please go away and leave me. My brother will pay you for—”

“Pay me!” the preacher sniffed, reluctantly twisting his body so that he half faced Marty. “I don’t make visits like this for pay. You nor he nor no one else could pay me. I see I’m not needed. Thank God, I have kept my temper. I am sorry for you. I am sorry for the—the—lady you allude to, also, and if I didn’t treat her with all the respect she deserves, it was not intended.”

Carter remained standing after the preacher had angrily stalked from the room. Marty sat staring at the floor like a convicted criminal. Presently she got up to go to the kitchen. Henry had turned his face toward the wall, and only the rising and sinking of the sheet over his breast indicated that he was still alive. Carter took the chair vacated by the preacher. It was his movement that caused Henry to glance in his direction.

“Oh, Cart, Cart, I don’t want to die!” he moaned. “You don’t know what it’s like—you never will know till your time comes, till all hope is gone. Say, you haven’t led a religious life, either, have you?”

“No, no.” Carter felt that he was fairly hurling a confession at the desperate man with the hope that his own culpability might comfort him. “I’ve been worse. Henry, I’ve been a thousand times worse than you. You were never warned, deliberately warned; but I was. At one time I had a chance to make amends for my most grievous offense, and refused. In cold blood, after days of reflection, I refused. I am suffering untold agony at this moment. Your death is my death. It may not seem possible to you, but it is the truth. I sinned against God as no other man to my knowledge ever sinned, and the consequences stand before me in letters of accusing fire.”

THE INNER LAW

"I don't believe it!" Henry said. "You are all right. You show it by your kindness and charity to Marty. She told me last night that she was surprised. She thought you were like Milly, and dreaded meeting you more than anybody in all the world, and yet, she said, from the minute she laid eyes on you she knew you had a kind, pitying heart. She will be awfully lonely after—after it is over. She will have no kin or friends to speak a kind word, and I brought her to it. If she hadn't met me, and if I hadn't followed her up, she would have been a contented wife and have had a home and friends."

"I'll be a friend to her as long as I live," Carter said, deeply moved.

"I know, but, after all, what can you do? Nothing—nothing! Now please leave me alone."

Wearily Henry turned his face away, and his brother crept softly from the room and out where the slanting rays of the sun swept the yard.

A long, sultry day dragged by. Late in the afternoon Dr. Manson came. He remained alone with the patient several minutes; then he came out to where Marty and Carter sat on the lowest step of the porch.

"He is much weaker," he announced. "He is sinking fast. He can't live till sun-up to-morrow."

"Does he realize that it will be so soon?" Carter asked.

"I think not. He may soon become unconscious. There is absolutely nothing I can do, and as I am greatly needed on a maternity case down the river, I am afraid I cannot stay longer."

After he had driven away, Marty went into the sick-room and Carter walked to the gate, looking at the brilliant sunset. He thought of the immensity of the material universe, and then the idea occurred to him that the power behind it all was the very force which was then working upon his spirit and that of his dying brother.

THE INNER LAW

"What can I do—what?" he asked himself, over and over. "And I must do something. I must—I must!"

At twelve o'clock that night Marty came to him as he lay, partly clothed, on his bed.

"Please come!" she whispered. "I don't know what to do."

Side by side they went along the hall to the door of the sick-room. Carter heard Henry's voice, and a shock of horror went over him. In low, harsh tones Henry was cursing. Oath followed oath; obscene words, unmentionable confessions made with low, satanic chuckles, fell from his lips. As they entered the room he glared blankly at them, and they saw that he did not know them.

"Hey, you fellows, listen to this!" He laughed and began a ribald song in a low, piping voice, and then drifted into a story of the vilest order. To stop the sheer horror of the thing Carter bent over him and took his hand.

"How do you feel, brother?" he asked.

Henry stared blankly for a moment, then a look of recognition gradually dawned in his eyes. "Oh, it's you!" he cried; and then he frowned upon Marty. "Go away, for God's sake, woman, go away!" he cried. "I can't die with you looking at me like *that*. You—you, of all! Somehow, some way, you look like—like my own mother and some dirty harlot all in one. Go away! Go away!"

With a bewildered stare in her eyes, a welling sob in her throat, Marty glided from the room. Carter heard her tiptoeing along the hall to the front porch, and he had a mental picture of her standing there, looking into the night, weeping and praying desperately.

"Oh, Cart, Cart"—Henry seemed unconscious of what he had just said—"can't you do something for me? Maybe some specialist—some big city doctor—could save me. Telegraph to Atlanta. You are rich, and they would

THE INNER LAW

come on the first train. I can't give up! I can't—I can't! I've had dreams, awful dreams. Cart, I dreamt that I was at the gate of heaven, unable to enter. I dreamt that I stood there, a raging devil, cursing God and all the angels of light. Oh, Cart, Cart, *don't* let me die—*don't!*"

"I'll go; I'll telegraph!" Carter gasped.

He went out, found Marty on the porch, and told her what Henry wanted, asking her how he could get to the telegraph-office.

"There is no way to go now," she said, bluntly. "Can't you see that he is dying? The doctor knows and I know he can't last till morning. All the skill on earth couldn't save him. He is doomed or he couldn't say that to me."

"Yes, it is too late," Carter agreed. "It was only because he requested—"

"Hush! Listen!" Marty cried, laying her stiff hand on his breast.

A sound of harsh, gurgling breathing came to them through the still hall, and they hastened to the sick-room. Henry lay, his head off the pillow, as if he had been trying to rise in a last supreme effort. He was unconscious, the lids of his eyes opening and closing spasmodically. Marty raised Henry's head and put it on the pillow, and as she did so all sound of his breathing ceased. The face and body lay motionless.

"Oh, I've killed him!" Marty cried. "I didn't go to do it. Oh! Oh!"

Carter bent over his brother's face. Presently he felt Henry's breath faintly fanning his cheek and detected the gentle movement of the low chest.

"No, he is still living," he said. "You've only made him more comfortable, that's all; but he is dying."

Half an hour later it was over. Carter left Marty drawing a clean sheet, which she had washed and ironed with her own hands, over her dead lover, and went out into

THE INNER LAW

the still starlight. He breathed in the moist air in selfish relief. Another day, he reflected, and Henry's body would be laid in the little plot back of the house, where lay the remains of his uncle, of his aunt, and of his cousin Tom. Then he, the last male survivor of the tragic family, would leave the spot, never to see it again. Among men, women, and affairs, books and things, he would try to forget it all, and yet there was something he was sure he would never forget—never cease to see. It was that last, peaceful look—that eyeless stare of wonder and pleased expectancy—stamped upon the rotting lineaments of a corpse resembling himself.

PART IV

CHAPTER I

TO obtain diversion, to avoid contact with the things which reminded him so keenly of the past, which he now loathed with a slowly awakening soul for higher things, Carter Crofton returned to New York. A change had come over him which only an experienced psychologist could fully explain. He had begun to feel, as all the great mystics of the past have felt, that luxurious living was fundamentally wrong. He had learned from Tolstoy and others that the gradations of selfishness were innumerable, and that even the finest form of it was more or less wrong; the grosser forms wrong to gross men, and the finest forms wrong to those who have partial visions of infinite truth, and yet remain too material to quite shake off the clinging demands of the flesh. So Crofton had come to be almost in terror of his own wealth, and to wonder what he would ultimately do with it. He saw poor men happy, their faces lighted up with content over their humble work, and, while he envied them their lot, he began to feel sure that the whole discordance of his life had risen primarily from his father's selfish accumulation, and his own more than selfish use of his share of it. This reasoning made him more generous with every one, especially the poor. He did not often give to persons who knew him, but he gave freely to needy strangers, exulting over the secret thought that he was obeying the divine precept that one should not let his left hand know what his right did.

So when he reached New York he shrank instinctively

THE INNER LAW

from going to the fashionable hotel where he had stayed a short time before. Through an advertisement in one of the morning papers he secured a very inexpensive room in the unpretentious house of Mr. and Mrs. Lampson, an aged couple, in West Ninetieth Street. The quiet, homelike simplicity of the place appealed to his tired fancy; he liked the old people, and they seemed to like him from the start. It pleased him to think that they knew nothing of him and that they would judge him for what he showed himself to be intrinsically. He told them that he was a literary man and a student, and they were not curious to know more, evidently regarding him as a bachelor of limited means, as his simple manner of living and plain attire suggested.

An idea had come to him that he would, if possible, stay out of all contact with people and things belonging to his past, so he had his letters and business communications forwarded to him by his New York bankers, who were instructed not to mention to any one the address of his residence.

He was now occupied with the rarest pursuit known to those intellectual men who have renounced dogmatic belief, and yet ardently desire as far as possible to solve the "Great Mystery." He was trying to prove to himself that there was an infinite meaning to life. He often told himself that if such men as Jesus, Kant, Rousseau, Socrates, Plato, not to mention hundreds of modern serious thinkers of note, had satisfied themselves of their own continuance in another and higher life, such an assurance might be found even for him, and that was what he now craved almost to the point of monomania.

He spent at least half of every day reading in the great reference-room of the Public Library, the remainder was given to walks in the streets or parks. He had always had the knack of gaining prompt and easy access to the companionship of strangers, and now, under the thought that

THE INNER LAW

he would not be apt to meet such persons a second time, and that no two of them would compare notes and discover the single trend of his mind, he made a point of drawing them into the subject which had so completely absorbed him. Was any human being immortal! If so he himself was, and if he was immortal, then there was a reason for all he had been through and was then experiencing. The idea that he might be an earthly pupil in an eternal school of spiritual evolution raised him to a transcendental height.

He had acquired the habit of talking aloud to himself as he strolled about in quiet places, and he prayed. He prayed oftener when he recalled Henry's death, which he had come to look upon as his own death, for he knew his own was quite as certain and physically would amount to the same.

One temporary phase of his pursuit was unusual for a man of his type. He had read a good many of the works issued by the Society for Psychical Research and its members in England and America, and in his conversations with strangers he frequently inquired if they or their friends had had such experiences as that society has recorded, investigated, and published. And the result of these inquiries surprised him greatly, for almost daily he was told marvelous things by persons whose sincerity he had no cause to doubt.

He heard of a certain spiritualistic medium who was said to have wonderful power of divination, and he attended one of her afternoon séances, although he had learned that such meetings were contrary to the law. He was admitted by a servant-girl, to whom he paid the required fee of one dollar, into a long, gas-lighted parlor where he found about a score of men and women seated in chairs against the wall. In the center of the room, walking to and fro, was a blond woman of middle age and medium height, who weighed over two hundred and

THE INNER LAW

fifty pounds. She was dressed as fancifully as a young girl, and seemed proud of the adoration of her audience, all of whom seemed to be habitués of the meetings. When Carter was shown in the medium approached him and gave him a fat hand heavily decorated with rings, and smiled cordially.

"This is your first visit," she said.

"I've only been in the city a short while," he returned, pleasantly.

"But you are interested in spiritualism, I'm sure," she went on, still smiling agreeably, and toying with a great red rose which some one of the audience had brought to her.

"Yes, naturally," he said; "but if you will excuse me for it, I will admit frankly that I am a doubting Thomas."

"They all are *at first*," she laughed, softly; "then some slight thing shows them that I know more than they think I do, and then they come often enough to be wholly convinced in the end. By the way, how did you leave the South?"

"The South?" he said. "Then you think I am a Southerner?"

"I? Oh no, not I myself. Such information is always given me by the spirits. There is an elderly lady with you." Here the medium put her hand over her closed eyes and remained silent a moment. "Ah! she may give you a message later. She is your mother, I know that. I see an old-fashioned Southern home, and negroes all about. But I can't get more for you just now; they are pressing around you—other relatives, I mean—all trying to speak to you. They know they can use me, you see. I'm what the spirits call 'a light.' I must go to work now; all these good people are waiting on me. I may have a message for you. I can't say positively, but I may."

She left him and took her place on a low platform at

THE INNER LAW

the end of the room, where two heavy dark-green curtains hung ready to be drawn together. The gas in the room was lowered till the faces in the group were unrecognizable one to the other. She announced in her natural voice that after a few moments, in which she wished a hymn to be sung, she would become entranced, and while in that condition she would become possessed by her "control," a young girl known as "Sunbeam," who had died during the Civil War. The curtains were drawn. Carter heard a chair groan as she sat down in it. Then some one near the platform began to sing "Lead, Kindly Light," and when it was over a low, girlish laugh was heard from behind the curtains.

"How are you, everybody?" the childlike voice piped up, in tones which to Crofton bore a strong resemblance to the medium's natural utterance.

"Quite well, thank you, Sunbeam," a woman cried out from the dark human line opposite Crofton. "How are *you*, to-day?"

"Oh, I'm all right," Sunbeam answered in rippling tones. "We are always right on this side. We have nothing to bother us but you poor people who are still sleeping in the dark. We feel like shaking you sometimes, you stupid things!"

Thereupon followed many eager questions from the audience, to which Sunbeam gave answers which were evidently satisfactory. A tailor wanted to ask his dead father if he should continue to pay for his shop as much rent as his landlord was demanding.

"If you can't make him more reasonable, give in to him," was the prompt response. "Things are coming out well for you, Mr. Weinmeister. I can't explain how just now, but everything seems bright ahead for you."

A young woman wanted to know of her departed brother, whom she called "Frank," if she should continue to take the tonic she was using for indigestion, and was

THE INNER LAW

told that she might take it at least two weeks longer, but that she must constantly have outdoor exercise and not worry. All these things were boring and disgusting Crofton, and he wanted to get away, but did not know how to do so without disturbing the others, for the door was closed, and he could not see his way to it through the darkness. Suddenly Sunbeam called out:

"The gentleman from the South is impatient. Southerners are impatient as well as hot-headed in a fight or politics," she laughed. "His mother is here. She knows he has had disappointment, grief, or trouble, and wants me to tell him that he worries too much. It will kill him if he doesn't stop."

At this point Crofton found courage to speak out. He wanted more proof of the genuineness of the thing than he had had. "You say I am from the South," he said. "Perhaps you can tell me my name?"

"Ah, there you are breaking the rules of the game, sir," Sunbeam tittered. "Names used on earth are seldom ever recalled by us on this side. It is hard to explain, but we have no longer any use for them. Mine was—was— I declare I don't remember."

"Well, what can you tell me that I ought to know," Crofton said, coldly.

"This much," was the obviously resentful reply, "and that is that you want to understand these things very much, but you have now a frame of mind that will prevent you from getting at the truth. You doubt everything you see and hear in this room. I am never able to satisfy a doubting person, and I no longer try. I tell you now, however, that I can help you in your business if you will come to my meetings like the rest of these people, and not always be on the lookout for fraud."

"My business?" Crofton sneered. "I have no business."

"You say you have no business?" The voice fell al-

THE INNER LAW

most into the coarser tone of the medium's normal voice. "You see, sir, what *you* mean and what *I* mean are different things. I use the word 'business' for everything that a person is engaged in. Your business at present is getting this spiritual question settled. Am I on the right track?"

"Perhaps," he answered; "still, you have not told me anything that is at all convincing."

"I haven't, eh? Well, it is only your own fault. What—what is it back there? Don't all speak at once. I'm under an awful strain to-day. Tell him what? What is it you want him to know? You are his brother, eh? You look dazed. You haven't been over here long. Now, now, that will do. I will tell him—if I can, but I'm sure when I get back on the earth plane it will slip from me."

"Did you say it was my brother?" Carter asked.

"That is what he says," the medium answered. "He told me something he wanted you to know, but I can't remember it. If you will come here again I may be able to tell you, but not to-day. I've given you a lot of my force. I'm as weak as a sick kitten." Here Sunbeam laughed softly. "Hush! 'sh—sh! That same fellow is tugging and pulling at me. He is a desperate, miserable shade of a man, anyway. They are calling him back there, his mother and father and an uncle, I think he is—yes, his uncle. I hear the name—Hal—Hal—Hen—Hen—Henry! Henry—yes, that is right—Henry. Henry something or other. It begins with a C, but that is all I know. Folks, I'm plumb fagged out. You must all go away now. I'll see you, as usual, next meeting."

The gas was turned up; a curtain at the window on the street was raised; the sunlight blended with that of the gas, showing faces from which Crofton shrank instinctively as belonging to persons of materialistic tendencies. In the crowded hall he found himself close to a short, bald, middle-aged man.

THE INNER LAW

"You had luck," the man said, his eyes blinking almost timidly behind a pair of double-thick glasses.

"Luck? What do you mean by that?" Crofton asked, impatiently.

"Why, she told you a lot for a first visit. I came here five times before she ever gave me as much as she did you. I lost my wife three years ago. I was miserable till I happened to hear of Madam's wonderful power. I wouldn't take a fortune for what she's told me. I get a message at least once a week from my wife. She says she is waiting for me on the other side. That's comfort, isn't it, when up to that time I didn't believe I was any more than a hog? Now I know what is ahead."

"Has this medium ever told you a *single thing* that you did not already know?" Crofton asked, sharply. They were on the stoop outside now, and the man made no answer till they had reached the pavement. He seemed to be reflecting.

"I can't say she has, exactly," he answered, presently; "but—but I'm satisfied. Didn't you like what she told you?"

"She told me nothing that I did not know," Crofton said in a tone of contempt. "Thought-reading—even subconscious thought-reading—is an established fact, as is telepathy and other psychic phenomena. In my opinion this woman is a fraud and ought to be arrested."

"You don't mean that, surely?" The man shrank back in surprise.

"I certainly do," Crofton answered, sharply. "She has deluded you, for one."

He left the man staring dumbly after him as he strode away. Crofton was thoroughly disgusted. He felt as if he had pulled a beautiful ideal down into the mire. He told himself that if he could not arrive at the great truth which he was seeking by a more worthy means he would give up the pursuit of it.

CHAPTER II

HE had never felt more lonely and discouraged in his life than he did that night when he went to his room to go to bed. The old couple were entertaining visitors in the back parlor. Their daughter, son-in-law, and two children, a boy and a girl, had come in from a suburban town to spend a few days. Mr. Lampson heard his latch-key in the lock and hastened out to invite him in to meet his guests and partake of some beer and a rarebit which the son-in-law was making. But Crofton excused himself and went on up to his room.

It was not ten o'clock, and yet he began to prepare for bed. Some one, he was sure, from the touch on the keys, that it was a child, began playing the piano. The simple air ended, and the older people clapped their hands and shouted in admiration.

"Splendid! Splendid!" It was Mr. Lampson's voice. "Now, come sit on my knee and give 'old granddad' a hug, you little beauty!"

Crofton closed his door to shut out the sounds of merriment.

"What is the use?" he asked himself. "How can I possibly go on like this?" Suddenly he bethought of his morphine, took the bottle from his pocket, and fondled it in his sweat-damp palm. "More than enough to put me out of it all," he reflected. "They say it is a painless sleep, a soothing glide off into eternal nothingness. Why shouldn't I end it all? Why?"

He shook out some of the tablets into his hand. "That would be enough," he said. "They would find me here

THE INNER LAW

in the morning, looking like—like Henry did. My God! I'd look like that! I'd *be* like that! Lydia Romley might hear of it through some newspaper and know that she was at last avenged. She would feel relieved, perhaps. Oh, how beautiful she was that day in Washington! She has risen in spite of the blight I left upon her, while I have sunk down, down to this, and what could be worse—what more just?"

Obeying a sudden impulse, he put the tablets back into the bottle and dropped it into his pocket. Then he finished disrobing and got into bed, and lay there trying to compose his mind for sleep.

He waked the next morning with a headache and feeling even more despondent than ever. He thought of going to the Public Library to read, but gave up the idea, for he was in no mood for reading. In fact, there was no subject which interested him now except the one he had entertained the night before—suicide, and it both charmed and repelled him.

He thought of it as he sat in the little restaurant, drinking his coffee. He wondered what the jovial young Irish waitress, with that rosy glow on her cheeks and those smiling pink lips, would think if she knew she was serving a man who was going to die by his own hand. He was sure now that he would not live till the sun set that day. Indeed, when he left the restaurant he began deliberately to plan the gruesome act. He had read of persons who had taken their lives out in quiet, shaded retreats in the open air. That was good, he told himself, for it would be dying on the bosom of Nature like a starved animal, a bird with broken wings, or a reptile—reptile! Why had he thought of that? He thought of Lydia, and a sob of self-pity rose and hung in his throat. Oh, if only she would forgive him—she whom he had wronged so terribly, and whom he had loved and still loved with a passion which he was now beginning to understand.

THE INNER LAW

He found himself at the Subway station at Ninety-sixth Street, and entered the up-town side with a throng of passengers. On the concrete below the street he stood hesitating, not knowing what he would do. He allowed several trains to pass him, and then, seeing one marked Van Cortlandt Park, he went in and sat down. A merry party of young men and girls with golf-bags sat across the aisle and were laughing merrily. They were going to play a game with sticks and balls on a sward of green! while he was going out to die. How wretched life was, These young fools would realize it sooner or later. Had life not once been as bright to him, and what was it now?

At Dyckman Street he left the train, for he had got a glimpse of the sheer, brown cliffs of the Palisades on the New Jersey shore across the Hudson, and remembered that there was a small motor-ferryboat at the foot of the street which took passengers over every few minutes. Leaving the train, he walked along the street till he saw a brown, brawny boatman waving a red flag and shouting: "Ferry! Ferry! This way, please! First boat to Jersey!"

The little launch was almost filled with eager excursionists. Some Boy Scouts, in brown-duck uniforms, with tents, cooking utensils, and axes in unwieldy bundles, were loading a flatboat which was rocking alongside the float. Several young men and young girls in attractive bathing-suits were getting into canoes. Most of the young men were smoking cigarettes. A sweet-faced woman sat next to Crofton, holding a big basket filled with provisions. She was explaining to another woman opposite that her three little sons were living in a tent among the campers on the other side, and that she was going over to see how they were getting on. After the boat had started a girl in the stern began to play a mandolin, and her companion, a handsome young man in a red sweater, white-duck trousers, and tennis shoes, began to

THE INNER LAW

sing. Some of the passengers joined in. The boatman, busy at the wheel, made a jest about taking up a collection, and everybody laughed except Crofton. How could he laugh? The very care-free merriment of the others grated on him. How could they be so joyous? He told himself bitterly that they were mere human flies buzzing before the cobweb trap of life in the depths of which lay hidden a monster which, sooner or later, would devour their bodies and souls. What would they think of the part he was to play in the day's program? Would it stop their insane merriment for a minute?

A great steamer bound for Albany had just passed. Its decks were filled with passengers. It threw off huge waves which caused the little ferryboat to rise and fall like a floating nutshell, and the spray to dash over the merrymakers. They passed a young man swimming toward the Jersey shore with strong, even strokes.

"He is going across again," the boatman told a man at his side. "I know him. He does it once a week. One of these days he will go down with the cramps. He is tired now, but it would make him mad if I offered to take him aboard."

"Hey, want a cigar, Joe?" he jestingly called out to the swimmer.

"No, thanks," was the answer.

The landing was made. The boatman sprang upon the pier, drew a rope around a post, and began to help the women out. The pier was quite long, and from its sides men and boys were throwing out crab-nets. The beach was level and sandy, and there were bath-houses and floats for bathers. Canoes of many brilliant colors and several launches and rowboats gave almost a Venetian touch to the scene. The blue water was alive with swimmers, who were shrieking from the pure joy of life. All along the wooded shore at the immediate foot of the brown cliffs stood the white tents of campers from the city,

THE INNER LAW

Leaving the pier, Crofton took a winding path which led into the dense shade of a veritable jungle of trees, underbrush, wild vines, and mossy, gray boulders. He looked up the side of the great natural wall and wished it would lean forward, crack, groan, fall upon him and bury him from the sight of mankind for ever.

He had walked northward perhaps half a mile before he saw a spot which seemed retired enough for his purpose. It was a nook thickly clothed in dogwood and sassafras bushes about a hundred yards from the path on his left. The ground was uneven, covered with jagged stones, and the incline was steep; but he finally reached it and sat down with his back against a cool foot-stone of the vast cliff. He told himself that the spot was suitable. What more fitting than that last view of the sun across the water, and the far-off white line of the city's apartment-houses? for he was done with it all. The first stood for relentless Nature, the other was the useless work of Nature's blind and stupid victims. Shouts and songs came from the camps along the shore below. How could they be so contented? Had they never suffered or seen suffering in others? Had they never pleaded with God to tell them the awful meaning of life, and been beaten by the maddening silence of the unknowable?

He took from his pocket his little bottle and kissed it. He shook out the tablets one by one into a palm which appeared to him to be paler, more bloodless, and more clammy than ever before. The five-pronged thing with its polished nails was steady. He marveled over that, and held out his arm at full length. It, too, was steady. He himself was steady. His pulse was beating no quicker than usual. Why wait? Why wait? he asked himself. One by one he would swallow the tablets till he had taken enough, then he would lie back and sleep—sleep!

He was about to take the first tablet when he heard

THE INNER LAW

some one idly whistling not far from him. Quickly concealing the morphine, he looked about him. Presently he discovered, a few yards above him, on a vine-hung shelf of the cliff, a young man with a pencil and a pad of paper on his knee. He was busy writing even while he whistled. He was tall, well formed, athletic in build, had a smooth, sun-browned face, neck, and hands, hazel eyes, and a thick shock of dark hair, which he wore rather long and carelessly roached back from a fine brow. Crofton watched him for several minutes, and presently the other, looking down, caught his eye.

"Good morning," he said, smiling. "I saw you climb up there just now, and started to warn you to look out. There are a lot of rattlesnakes around us. I've scared up two or three this morning, myself."

"Thank you very much." Crofton shuddered at the sudden sound of his voice.

"It is a wonderful day, isn't it?" the younger man said, agreeably. "May I ask if you happen to have a match? I'm dying for a smoke. I had some, but I got them wet in my canoe." On receiving an affirmative reply he took a big pipe from his pocket and began to fill it with tobacco. "Don't get up," he cried; "I'm coming that way. I've got to go down to my tent to cook some lunch. I am as hungry as a bear."

Crofton had taken some matches from his pocket, and the young man started down to him. He tripped on a rolling stone, slid to a sitting posture, and with a merry laugh got up, his pipe still between his fine white teeth.

"I'm always doing that stunt," he said, flushing beneath his dark skin, his deep brown eyes seeming to smile behind their thick lashes. "Thank you, thank you, very much, sir," taking the matches. "I simply go crazy when I can't smoke. Oh, I say, sir, look where you are sitting!" He was pointing the stem of his pipe at the thick, dark-leaved vines upon which Crofton sat. "Don't you know

THE INNER LAW

that plant? It's poison ivy. It plays the very devil with the skin this time of the year when the pores are open. I had a dose of it three years ago when I and some other fellows were camping over here."

"I didn't know what it was," Crofton answered, rising and moving to a fallen tree, where he sat down. "I don't think I touched it with my hands."

"Oh, I guess you've escaped it this time." The young man had lighted his pipe, and as he puffed the smoke from his mouth he bent over the ivy leaves and examined them closely. "Isn't it queer that they haven't the same normal look as ordinary leaves?"

"I had not thought of it," Crofton answered.

"I wonder if I have a special sight for such things?" the other continued, as if speaking half to himself, and bending lower. "I sometimes fancy that I see a deeper meaning in natural things than many of my friends do." He raised his eyes with an expression almost of earnest appeal. "For instance, it seems to me that these leaves have their noisome character stamped upon them like the faces of some disagreeable people. See how—how villainous, how different from other plants they look! I've seen a stout young oak actually killed by their twining about its trunk. Of course plants feel, think, and know what pertains to their welfare, and the beautiful and useful ones, with their flowers and their fruits, must heartily detest these contemptible things."

"I presume so." Crofton's thoughts were quite drawn from himself and his troubles by the youth's attractive appearance and original talk. "You must be a great student?" he added, his glance now on the pad and pencil. "And do you write, too?"

"Yes, I write more or less, and I'm a regular book fiend," the other laughed. "As for my writings, I am not sure yet what they amount to. I think I am peculiar, for everybody says so. They call me a crank. It used to

THE INNER LAW

make me very unhappy. I worried about it a great deal, and finally I determined to find out what was wrong with me and sought the explanation in books."

"Wrong with you? Why do you put it that way?" Crofton asked.

"Well, it was an uncomfortable feeling, anyway." The speaker sat down on the log beside Crofton and contracted his brows thoughtfully. "You see, I am always finding that the things which interest me most are absolute foolishness to everybody about me, and my friends do not hesitate to tell me so whenever I open my mouth on any subject that claims my attention."

"What subject, for instance, if you would not mind making your meaning a little clearer?" Crofton leaned forward almost eagerly.

"There *you* go!" the youth laughed. "You ask that like the average practical person that takes me to task, and if I give you a straightforward answer from my heart you will no doubt think I am silly, and deny my statement as all the rest do. I sometimes think, from books I've read, that I am a mystic, and I don't say it boastingly, you see, for very uneducated persons—shoemakers, tailors, and the like are often mystics."

"What is your definition of the word 'mystic'?" Crofton inquired, even more interested.

"Oh, the regular philosophical one, I suppose," the youth said, with another of his characteristic frowns. "I think a mystic is a person with a highly developed power of sensing the infinite spirit of the universe within himself, and, that being so, he comprehends the unimportance of the visible material things which the ordinary world not only values, but worships. That frame of mind isolates him, you see, from the rest of his kind. But I am boring you, I am sure."

"Oh no, you are not!" Crofton declared. "In fact, I am very, very much interested. I have read these things in

THE INNER LAW

the works of old philosophers, but never expected to find that they were believed in by one so young as yourself. You certainly think deeply and also you seem to believe in God."

"Believe in God? who doesn't?" the boy replied. "Ah"—he dropped a sudden sympathetic and probing glance on Crofton's face—"now I understand you better. I was wondering what was—was odd about you. I felt it—I felt that you were out of harmony somehow, and now that I look at you more closely I see marks of suffering in your face. You *have* suffered, have you not?"

"I've always been morbid," Crofton answered, with desperate candor. "I have never been able to quite conquer the tendency. It has clung to me since I was a young man, and increased till at times it is almost unbearable."

"I see." The youth gravely refilled his pipe, packing the tobacco down into the big bowl with a slender finger. "I wish I could help you, but I'm afraid I can't. There is one single thing, and one thing only that will cure a man of your disease, and no one can give it to him. He has to have it naturally. It is expressed in one short word—Faith."

"Faith?" Crofton repeated, wondering what his strange companion would say next.

"Yes, if a man believed absolutely that all was well with the universe, and reflected for a moment on its grandeur, he could not be unhappy about anything. The unhappiness of intellectual persons—and they are the most unhappy persons in the world—comes from doubt. But, after all, in a way, you are lucky to be as you are."

"Lucky? Why do you say that?" Crofton asked.

"Because it proves that you have a rare quality, and that is the capacity for suffering. It proves, too, that you are on your way out."

"On my way out?" Crofton wondered at the soothing

THE INNER LAW

spell that lay over him—at the subtle comfort he was finding in the companionship of this startling youth.

“Oh yes, you are on the way out. I can see it in your face and eyes—I can almost—now I am tempted to say one of the things that people always laugh at, and yet which I believe and which some great philosophers believe, according to their writings, and that is, that—” Here the speaker paused, looked silently at the ground for several minutes, and flushed. “What’s the use? I can’t put it in words. I am always tempted to try to express such things, only to find my tongue tied in the effort. The very greatest things are those which one cannot transmit to another, and this is one of them. It haunts me at this instant—haunts me like—like a dream that is full of meaning, but I can’t express it. I can’t—I can’t.”

“I wish you would try,” Crofton gently urged. “You see, you mentioned it as some impression you got from my own looks.”

“I wish I could make myself clear”—the youth was still modestly flushing—“especially since you are interested, and so few are in such things. Whitman touches upon the idea, and Maeterlinck goes more deeply into it. I have felt it often—often, and it has given me the greatest happiness. Well, it is like this: I have been talking to persons—average persons—and in my work (I am a cabinet-maker, a wood-carver) I meet all classes of people from the lowest to the highest. I say I’ve been talking to persons—it might be an ex-convict, a thief, a close-fisted business man, a daredevil sailor with half a dozen wives in as many ports, a girl prostitute, when in momentary flashes I have seemed actually to *see*, not only feel and sense, but *see* with the eyes of my subconscious self their perfect souls shining pleadingly through their bodies like a wonderful light that is *not* a light.”

“And do you feel that way—about *me*?” Crofton asked, breathlessly, almost in reverential awe.

THE INNER LAW

"Yes; not just at this instant, for it always seems to go when I try to fix it, or analyze it, and I can't make it come again. It is a strange, wonderful thing, but to a person who has not had the experience it is an idiotic idea. I have an imagination which I have indulged since I was a child, and I like to fancy things that no other human being ever thought of. It seems to me that everything, of a high order, at least, that is imagined may be a reality to the one who conceives it. I have written hundreds of things—sketches, poems, stories—and stacked them up in my room. I may try to publish the best of them some day, but I am not ready yet. I want to be older and have more experience. I want to travel—see the world and *live*. I've been tied down all my life, and my longing to know more is almost unbearable."

"Have you been to college?" Crofton asked.

"I, to college? That's a joke," the youth laughed. "I have never had the chance. I've had to work hard all my life. I went to the public school a little while. My mother taught me almost all I knew till I began to read for myself. My father—well, I have never seen him in my life, and may never do so. I sometimes hope that I never shall. I don't like to think of him. My mother had to work hard to support me and my grandmother, and I started to work as soon as I was big enough. I am having a two months' vacation this summer. That is why I am here now. The shop I am working at has shut down for the season. I dread going back in the fall. This"—he waved his hand toward the river and the cliffs—"is heaven. I wish it could last for ever. Well, I must go down to my tent. If you feel hungry and will come with me I'll cook something for you, and make some good coffee."

"Thank you," Crofton answered, "I am going back to the city now, but I am coming over again."

"To-morrow? Shall you be over then?" the youth

THE INNER LAW

asked, eagerly. "For if you are coming I'll give you a good lunch. I've ordered a big beefsteak to be delivered in the morning. Some fellows were to be with me from the other side, and they sent word that they would not be over. We have no ice here, and meat will spoil soon. I wish you would come help me eat it."

"I can't come quite so soon, though it is kind of you to want me," Crofton answered. "I'll be over again in a few days, and I'll be sure to look you up. Whose tent shall I ask for?"

"Just ask for 'Socrates,'" the youth laughed. "A witty Irishman dubbed me that in the shop a few years ago, and it has stuck to me ever since. My name is Allen—Joseph Allen; but everybody, even my boss, now calls me 'Socrates.' You see, they make sport of me for reading so much. You'd laugh to hear the staggering questions they put to me. Well, good-by. I'll expect you soon."

"I'll be sure to come," Crofton answered.

He sat watching the boy descend the steep incline, jumping as nimbly as a fawn from rock to rock, and darting like a wild thing through the vines and bushes till he was out of sight. Crofton heard his merry whistle down near the tents on the water's edge, and wondered over the new interest which had so quickly risen in his life. For the first time in years he felt that he had found a friend whom he could trust and whom he could unselfishly care for. He put his hand into his pocket, felt the bottle of morphine, and shuddered. He had actually been on the verge of self-destruction. He must have been mad, he told himself. What would his new acquaintance have thought of that? With the heel of his shoe he dug a hole in the dark, moist soil, shook the tablets into it, and in shame over his past weakness he pounded the earth over them. Then he hurled the bottle against a boulder and smashed it.

CHAPTER III

AS he walked back to the boat-landing, along the rugged path, Crofton was conscious of a certain buoyancy of mood and body that was new and delightful. The air Socrates had whistled was ringing in his ears like a soothing lullaby to the discordance which had so long mastered him. If a mere boy like that who had to work for his living could have such a sustaining and uplifting faith, why couldn't he have it?

"Socrates, my new friend," he said, aloud, "you shall not escape me. You are my panacea. I'll dog your steps, my boy. I'll drink at your fount of wisdom till I am drunken with the truth and find peace—the peace which passeth understanding."

Under his new experience he hardly knew how the remainder of the day was passed. He walked in Riverside Park like a dreaming somnambulist till eight o'clock in the evening; then he went to his room, disrobed, and, the night being warm, he threw himself down on his bed before an open window. How could he account for the compelling and yet elusive charm of that chance acquaintance? He gave up trying to do so. He knew, only, that the boy's rich personality and evident genius had nestled into every recess of his tired consciousness.

When he waked the next morning his first thought was of Socrates. He looked from his window into the street. An ice-wagon stood on the opposite side, the driver was sawing a huge block of ice into small pieces and taking them to the basement doors with massive

THE INNER LAW

tongs. Why, a laborer like that could be happy with the faith of Socrates—a man on the gallows would be in bliss with it to hold to.

Then Crofton began to wonder how long it would be before he could meet the youth again without appearing to be too eager. Why had he not accepted the invitation for that very day? The boy had extended it sincerely; he had really wanted him to come. Without knowing who or what he was, Socrates had shown a sincere desire for his company. Then perhaps the attraction was mutual.

Crofton spent the greater part of that day in the Public Library. He pulled down book after book in the vast reference-room, but scarcely read a dozen pages. How flat and uninspired the written words seemed contrasted to that unique talk on the side of the cliff!

When he waked the next morning and saw that the day was fine he decided to go at once across the river.

"Why delay? Why delay?" he said. "I want to see him. I must see him!"

Accordingly, he ate his breakfast in a cheerful, even joyous mood, and by ten o'clock had reached the New Jersey shore. He betook himself at once to the path leading to the encampment. The day was glorious. A faint, bluish haze hovered over Columbia College, Grant's Tomb, the lofty apartment-houses and mansions farther northward on Riverside Drive, and over Fort Washington Park.

After a few minutes' walk the long line of tents was reached. All were close to the water's edge, and many of them showed great care and pride in their keeping. Before the doors little fires of driftwood were smoldering in small ovens of stone covered with iron gratings. Crofton paused at a fire where a brawny young man with an abnormally red face, and wearing a ragged bathing-suit, was boiling some vegetable soup in a pot.

"Good morning," Crofton greeted him. "I am look-

THE INNER LAW

ing for the tent of Joseph Allen, a young man. Is it near here?"

"Don't know any guy by that name," the man answered, "and I've been here some time. Maybe you are on the wrong track; there is a gang of young blokes with a lot of canoes and plenty of booze in a big tent below the landing. I don't know that they own up to any of their nasmé. The police on this side have threatened to lock them up several times."

"No, Allen's tent is somewhere near here, I am sure," Crofton answered. "I met him up there on the rocks the other day. I think his friends call him 'Socrates.'"

"Oh, Socrates!" the other laughed. "Say, Skipper, did you hear what the guy said?" turning toward his tent.

"I heard him," a voice answered, and the smoke-begrimed face of another young man, who was lying on a canvas cot, was exposed by the sudden widening of the tent's entrance. "Call Soc by a name like that and he wouldn't look around."

"You bet we all know *that* guy," the first speaker smiled. "He's everybody's friend. There are thirty-odd tents in this row alone, and twenty of them came here on account of that lad. His tent is further up the line. You can't miss it. It is the only one with a wood floor to it. Soc built it out of planks he picked up on the water. He knows how to use a saw and hammer. Walk straight ahead. You can't miss it."

Crofton went on up the line. Men and women, boys, girls, and babies in hammocks and boxes were in and about the tents. Presently he descried a neat white tent on a raised floor. It was open, but no one was in or about it. On the water's edge near by a barefooted young man with an Irish type of face, in a soiled undershirt and brown overalls rolled up to his knees, was painting an inverted canoe which rested on two stones. Crofton inquired for Socrates.

THE INNER LAW

"He's out on the float," the boy answered, with a touch of the Irish brogue. "He's in the swimming-match the boys got up for to-day. They are going to dive off in a minute. Look, they are lining up now. They will start as soon as the gun is fired."

Crofton saw a float three or four hundred yards out, on the edge of which a dozen young men stood in a straight line, looking down-stream. He thought he recognized the tall, slender form of his new friend.

"What is the course?" he asked the boy beside him.

"See the launch anchored this side of the landing?" was the reply from a big, facile mouth into which the boy had thrust the handle of his brush. "They have to go down there, pass around it, and swim back. The first man to touch the float wins."

"What sort of swimmer is Socrates?" Crofton asked.

"Fine—a regular fish!" the paint-brush mumbled; "but Soc don't feel so certain to-day. You see, two regular champs from the City College came over and entered at the last minute. Soc is the best unprofesh swimmer on the shore. He's got a dandy stroke. Shoots along with his head underwater like a torpedo-boat, and for a slim guy his wind is tiptop, but he is nervous to-day."

There was some delay; the line broke up and a group formed as if some discussion were taking place. All along the shore Crofton saw the inmates of the tents emerge and stand watching, and there was much impatient shouting and many jocular suggestions.

"Say, want to row out with me?" the boy asked. "I have got a boat handy. We could get close to 'em and follow 'em along."

"Yes, if you don't mind," Crofton replied.

"Well, come jump in!" The boy was already drawing a narrow white boat over the sand to the water, and the next moment it was afloat on the rising tide. Crofton took a seat in the stern, and the boy, who had waded

THE INNER LAW

into the shallow water, sprang in, grasped the oars, and began to pull for the float. The argument among the contestants was evidently prolonged, and the boat was quite near the float before the swimmers were ordered to form another line. And when they were so ordered Crofton saw Socrates stand erect on the edge of the float. As he did so Socrates caught sight of the boat and its occupants, and with evident pleasure smiled and waved his hand.

"Soc, I've got a friend o' yours," the boy cried out. "He was lookin' for you."

"I see you have, Jimmy. Thanks, old boy. I'll come ashore soon."

"Hey, Soc, you are goin' to win this race, remember!" Jimmy shouted back for other ears than his friend's. "You will leave them fat, bloated life-preservers like empty beer-kegs behind you. They can't swim outside of a pool under a college roof. Hold your wind, old boy, and don't make us ashamed of you."

"All right, Jimmy!" Socrates laughed. "I'll do my best."

"Hey, Jimmy," one of the college men retaliated, "keep your boat close to your friend. You may have to pick him up before we get through with him."

Jimmy grunted loudly in contempt, but made no further answer. The line of swimmers stood straight on the edge of the float. Every man had his hands clasped above his head. Crofton was strangely stirred by the scene, and the form of his new acquaintance was a poem in manly athletic flesh.

"Ready!" the leader cried, pointing his revolver upward. "I'll count three and fire. Ready now. One, two, three!"

The revolver was fired. The line of men, curving downward, cut the water's surface and went out of sight. Presently they appeared, spouting and churning the water like sporting seals, and yet all were moving forward.

THE INNER LAW

The sunlight glaring on the water temporarily blinded Crofton, and he lost sight of Socrates.

"I don't see him," he said to Jimmy, anxiously.

"I do; he's all right!" Jimmy panted, as he threw himself backward and jerked the boat along. "He's all right—second so far. Gee! look at that stroke! He is getting there, I tell you! He's on his mettle this morning. The honor of the camp is in his hands, and he knows it. Go it, Soc! You've just got one to beat! Spit on the fat son-of-a-gun and drown him!"

"Go it, Soc! Go it, Soc!" The cries came from the men, women, boys, and girls on the shore. And Crofton heard himself shouting like a madman and waving his hat and handkerchief. "Go it, Soc! Bravo!" he cried. And he had time, too, strange to say, to marvel over his own experience, which somehow seemed the rarest of his life. He found himself almost chilled by a fear that an accident might happen to his friend. Socrates might break a blood-vessel under such great strain, and sink.

On the swimmers went like a triangular school of fish, two still in the lead. They were now going round the anchored launch. Now they were heading back for the float.

"Damn 'im, the fat guy has gained on 'im!" Jimmy swore, under his breath, as he madly cut and "feathered" the water with the oars. "It is too long a dash for Socrates. Take breath, you damn fool!" he called out to his friend. "That bloak is all in! Be deliberate! Plenty of time before you. There you are—there! God bless you! That's the lick! You swiped a full yard from him! He is swallowing water. He's done for. God bless you, Soc, you may fry my ears for your dinner!"

There were now only two contestants; all the others were swimming more or less leisurely in the rear, and those two were battling side by side with apparently equal chances. The shouting and screaming came in a

THE INNER LAW

rolling wave of sound from the shore, where several were watching with field and opera glasses. Jimmy was silent now in sheer anxiety, keeping the boat alongside the two swimmers. Crofton caught a view of Socrates' face, as it swiftly turned to and fro with each stroke. It was tense and pale; his fine lips were pressed tightly together. In a flash their eyes met, and the swimmer smiled.

"You are bound to win!" Crofton shouted, his heart in his mouth. "Don't give up—don't!"

The float was now only thirty yards distant. He was not sure, but it struck Crofton that his words had had a powerful effect on Socrates. He seemed electrified. One mighty stroke pushed him a foot ahead of his rival, another backward thrust through the foaming water and he was still further ahead. Crofton heard the college man swearing, saw conscious defeat stamped on the dripping face, and then, as the slim swimmer shot ahead like an eel, he gave it up, and turned on his back to float and rest. The hand of the leader reached down and drew Socrates out of the water. The hand holding the revolver went round the strong, brown neck. Jimmy was lying in the bottom of the boat, kicking the middle seat with his heels and actually shedding tears.

"Darling boy! Angel one! King of the deep, deep sea!" he sobbed, as he sat erect. "The man that can beat you, my honey, has a steam propeller at the base of his spine. Say, some of you Latin and Greek and trigonometry chumps, tie your dead ox to my line and I'll tow 'im ashore!"

Socrates was now seated on the edge of the float. The swimmers were gradually coming in, shaking hands with him, or patting him affectionately on the back.

The leader stood forward to make an announcement. He had made a megaphone of a newspaper, and, placing it to his lips, he called out: "The winner is Soc— Damn it, what's your real name, anyway?"

THE INNER LAW

"Joe Allen!" Jimmy called out. "The guy with the electric fins—the shooting submarine ramrod. When he is in a match he goes through a bunch o' prize swimmers like a toad in a puddle full of oysters."

"The winner is Joe Allen!" the improvised megaphone shouted; and the tented shore sent out vociferous applause.

Jimmy had shoved his boat close to Allen. "Come, my hearty, let us take you ashore. Here is your friend. I'll make you a cup of tea and cook you a snack."

"All right, Jimmy," Socrates accepted. "I'm hungry as a bear. Haven't had a bite to-day." He smiled as he got into the boat and shook hands with Crofton.

"You did wonderful work," Crofton said.

"I didn't think I had a chance to win," the youth replied; "that is, not till the last minute. I'm queer about some things, and I'll be frank and tell you that in a way you did it."

"I? Why, surely you are jesting!" Crofton stammered in suppressed delight.

"No, I'm not," Allen answered. "It always takes something unusual to spur me on to my very best, and when I saw you in the boat with Jimmy—well, I did not want to fail before you. The thought of it somehow stung me, and I tried extra hard. I'd seen that college man swim in a race at a regatta on the other side of the river a month ago, in which he took the first prize. And when he entered here to-day I thought it was all up with me. But when I saw you, and heard you calling out to me as if you were really interested, why, I determined to win or die trying."

"I *was* interested," Crofton admitted, shaken by a sentiment which he could not fathom, "and I cannot explain how glad I am that you won."

The water, the sky, the balmy air, the towering Palisades seemed to smile benignly on the lonely world-

THE INNER LAW

wanderer that day. The careful courtesy with which both Jimmy and Socrates treated him was a thing hitherto unwritten in his experience, as they insisted on his staying in the boat while they sprang into the shallow water and all but lifted it and him ashore. He leaned back in a camp-chair before Socrates' tent, while the campers all along the line pressed around the swimmer, congratulating him with triumphant expressions of delight. Jimmy was busy at the fireplace making tea and frying eggs and bacon, and constantly joining in the talk with a wit that kept the group in constant roar of laughter.

"How do you like your eggs cooked?" he asked Crofton, approaching with a greasy spoon in his hand. "I can do them any way. I worked in a Bowery restaurant once."

"Oh, I am going back to the city, thank you," Crofton replied.

"Not before you break bread with us, you won't," Jimmy said, firmly. "Soc told me just now to make you stay—not to take a refusal. His word's law on this beach, I'm here to state."

"Well, I'll have mine just as you are frying them," Crofton gave in. "I'm hungry for the first time in a month."

CHAPTER IV

AFTER that day Crofton was a constant visitor at the camp. When the weather was too inclement for such an outing, and he was forced to pass the day in the city, he found himself at a loss as to what to do. Reading no longer interested him. He was rejoicing in a marvelous new experience which soothed him more than anything that had ever happened to him. He felt that Socrates and his associates genuinely liked him. They scarcely knew his name. They evidently thought he was a man of very limited means, or one out of regular employment, and he did not care to remove the impression. Another thing that surprised him was that he liked every one of them—sincerely and genuinely liked them, sympathized with them, listened eagerly to their personal accounts of their affairs. A man might be a plumber, a stone-mason, a janitor out of work, and yet this past associate of lords and ladies listened to the petty details of their calling more eagerly than he had listened to the chat of great European writers. He kept telling himself, and exultantly, too, that this was the real thing which had fallen upon him in his despair—the thing Count Tolstoy had tried to drag into his conventionally elegant and rebellious home; the thing Whitman had found in the companionship of stage-drivers, barkeepers, and human wharf-rats. It was glorious—glorious! he told himself. He had once believed that peace of mind could not possibly be found by a man of his peculiar temperament; he now realized that it was quite a simple matter. All that a

THE INNER LAW

despairing man had to do was to stop valuing himself and think only of the good of others. He must lose his life to gain it.

And yet there were secret, invisible forces to contend against. Now and then they would sweep down on him like keen winds of adverse design.

"What a fool you are!" an actual voice seemed to say. "Putting yourself down below your natural social plane at the suggestion of such dreaming fanatics as your idiotic Jacob Boehme, St. Francis of Assisi, and others. You have ample wealth, opportunity, the *entrée* to the best, and are throwing them away that you may be the boon companion of butchers, cobblers, sunken-browed truck-drivers, and the lowest of the low."

And the voice of this tempter depressed him at times, especially when he was alone in the city, and the sole cure for the mood was a visit to the camp across the river. When he had spent a day there, the return to his stifling, unornamented room in the sun-baked street was by sheer contrast all but unbearable. The money-getting grind of the people on all sides seemed actually abnormal. From the lowest to the highest it was a mad, blind rush for things that were unnecessary to any one's actual well-being. Men did both day and night work, wrecking their nervous systems, merely that they might live in the darkened rear of apartment-houses having liveried porters and situated in a so-called fashionable section.

He and Socrates took long walks through the country together, eating their simple meals at the roadside like hardened tramps. Once they spent the night out, sleeping on the ground on beds of fallen leaves. It was glorious that night, for the moon was shining brightly and the Hudson was spread out beneath them like a strip of burnished silver. As they lay there side by side, Socrates became more confidential than he ever had been before.

"Oh, I've not always been contented and cheerful,"

THE INNER LAW

he said, with a reminiscent sigh. "I have read that great crises usually come into the lives of thinking persons when they are in or past middle age, but my real crisis came when I was only fourteen. Oh, it almost killed me! I actually tried to take my life. What do you think of that?"

"That was sad—sad!" Crofton seemed to feel the very chill of the earth creep through him, so great was his sympathy for the boy whose voice was now quavering so pathetically at his side.

"Yes, yes, it was awful. I never have been able to speak to any one of the—the thing that drove me to it, and I may not go so far to-night. Don't you think one may have a trouble which is too profound and sacred to mention?"

"Yes, I presume so," Crofton answered, aimlessly.

"I feel that way about this, with most people, but not with you," Socrates went on. "In fact, somehow—I can't explain it—but somehow I want to tell you. It all came in a certain discovery I made, or reasoned out till it was a fact of my being, and in one moment I became just the opposite of what I had been up to that time—a care-free, joyous boy who believed he was going to conquer the world. It seems to me, as I look back on that period eight years ago, poor as we were, I had the pride of an emperor. I know now that it was only my imagination at work. I used to walk the streets with my head high, thinking how low the common laboring people were by contrast to me and mine. I was proud of my mother. She was then and is now the most beautiful and noble creature in the world. I think it was my grandmother, rather than my mother, who put the silly ideas of superiority into my young brain. She was an unlettered woman, yet I used to hear her sighing and telling my mother, who had to work hard, that the blood of kings flowed in our veins, and that we had never been fairly treated.

THE INNER LAW

I tried, you see, to offset our poverty with the thought of our superior birth. Hell itself seemed leading me, a mere boy, into a deadly trap of human vanity." The voice of the speaker died away. Socrates seemed to be hesitating over what he might or might not care to tell.

"I am sure what you are saying is painful," Crofton mildly protested; "perhaps it would be better for us to talk of something else?"

"I don't know why I want to tell you at least a *part* of it," the boy returned, sitting up in the moonlight and locking his sinewy arms about his knees; but I love your sympathy. I simply *love* it. I have never met a man who appeals to me so deeply as you do. I seem to have known you for years and years and years. When you stay in the city and do not come I miss you in a way that is actual pain. Do you think I am silly for feeling this way and speaking so frankly?"

"No, no; oh no!" Crofton felt a lump filling his throat. He wanted to tell the boy how he himself prized their companionship, but could not do so. He shrank from formulating into spoken words the sentiment which had captured him body and soul, and now held him in a clutch of actual bliss.

"Well, I can't help feeling as I do," Socrates laughed, impulsively. "The other day I had a thought that fairly transported me. You remember you spoke of not working now, being out of employment, and the thought came to me that the most delightful thing imaginable would be for me to be able to earn money for you in your old age."

"Oh, absurd, absurd!" Crofton stammered. He was tempted here to make a confession as to the part he was playing, but something seemed to check the impulse. He was half afraid that the true charm of the unique relationship would vanish at such an announcement. Of course he would let the boy know later, but not yet.

THE INNER LAW

"Well, I feel that way," Socrates said, "and I am not ashamed of it. You see, I have never known my father, and a person with a highly developed imagination reaches out passionately for the things which are denied him, and so all through my childhood I used to ask questions concerning him. Neither my mother nor grandmother would gratify my curiosity, and as I grew older and began to piece things together I became conscious of a family mystery into which I was not admitted. Then, young as I was, I shrewdly, and in secret, determined to solve it. The first thing I noted was that neither of them ever said anything in my father's favor, and that troubled me. My mother was everything that a woman could be that was good and self-sacrificing, and I wanted him to be the same."

"So your mother was religious, then?" Crofton said. "No doubt it was her early teaching which made you so phenomenally reverent and full of faith?"

"It was one of the things which belonged to the mystery concerning me, at any rate," Socrates returned, with another sigh. "My father's ill treatment and desertion of my mother before my birth made her so desperate and miserable that she gave her whole attention and heart to me. Even before my birth, I understand now, she prayed constantly that I might not inherit my father's characteristics. And from the moment I was old enough to talk she began to train me, I sometimes think, as no living mother ever trained a child. I can remember when I was only about five that I told a lie, and how she cried over me, prayed aloud at my bedside, and pleaded with me never to do it again. It was like that all through my boyhood. I was ashamed to do wrong even in thought, for I actually worshiped her and looked upon her as a suffering saint. She told me that my father was dead, and she still thinks I believe it. My grandmother joined her in this, and I was forced back into my secret wonder-

THE INNER LAW

ing as to what it was all about. One day, when I was ill, I overheard my mother and grandmother talking in private, and then I knew the *whole* truth. I didn't let them know I had heard. You can easily guess what it was. I can't speak of it, even to you. But you can guess. You have only to think of the one thing which could stab the very soul of a child abnormally sensitive as to his parentage. It brought me down to the very dregs of despair. I became a sullen young fiend. I cursed the God my mother had taught me to worship. I laughed at the idea of a religion of love—at the idea of a God who could bring beings into a heartless world to suffer as my helpless mother and I were suffering through no fault of our own. It was then that I lost all hope and determined to end my life. At one time I thought of killing her, too, but gave up the idea. I couldn't bear to give her pain."

"And you a mere child!" Crofton cried, aghast.

"I seemed to be as old as Time," the youth declared, bitterly. "My soul was a wrinkled, gray, decrepit thing, snarling at the breath my body drew. Day after day I thought of the different ways to die, finding myself constantly checked by the thought that the knowledge of my suicide would add to my patient mother's burden. So I began to plan an end to myself that would seem accidental. We had lived in several cities, where my mother's work took her, but at this time we happened to be in New York. My mother and I had gone down to spend Sunday at Far Rockaway. I concluded that I would drown myself in the ocean. I was not then a good swimmer, and I decided to go out a little way and sink myself, thus making it appear that I had been attacked by cramps. I left my mother reading on the beach, went into a bath-house and put on my bathing-suit. At the moment I was so nearly crazed by my approaching ordeal that I was not very sorry for her. I remember I kept saying that a boy without a legal name had no right to

THE INNER LAW

live among millions of other boys who had not only names, but well-to-do fathers. I argued, too, that when I was dead my mother would not have to work so hard to provide for me, and she would not have me to remind her of her early misfortune—the scab upon her past would be removed.

“‘Be careful,’ I heard her say, as I kissed her, smiled, and started for the surf. Her sweet, sad look of pride, as her eyes followed me, went to my heart, and I choked down a sob of pity both for her and me as I plunged into the cool, rolling surf and began to swim from the shore. I went pretty far out, and felt the strong undertow dragging me further. From the crest of a billow I saw my mother drop her book, rise in excitement, run up and down the beach, calling for help and wildly pointing in my direction. But the guards were not on duty at the spot I’d chosen, and few men who were able to swim were near. I tried to sink myself, but while I went under I always came up again, and found myself automatically struggling to keep myself afloat. In one of my rises to the surface, I saw my mother kneeling on the sand of the beach and knew she was praying. Then something happened to me that has happened to many others whom I’ve read about. No one on earth could convince me that it was not some sort of psychic reality. I heard a voice call out far more clearly, more distinctly than I am speaking now. It said:

“‘Be a man, my boy! Save yourself! Bear your burden for your mother’s sake and your own immortal soul!’”

“Wonderful!” Crofton exclaimed. “And you—?”

“I was completely changed in an instant,” Socrates went on, a flare of enthusiasm in his eyes. “The sunlight dancing on the waves seemed filled with rare promise. Then I prayed—I prayed with every slow stroke I made to save myself. It was an awful fight. From the top of every billow that raised me I saw my mother still on her knees, her hands held up to the sky. A man was running

THE INNER LAW

for a boat. He sprang into it. He was not a good oarsman, but he pulled toward me slowly and awkwardly, while a crowd gathered on the beach and screamed encouragement to both of us. He finally reached me and drew me out of the water. I was so weak that I fainted, but I came to by the time we reached the shore, where I was received into my mother's arms."

"Did she know—did she ever suspect?" Crofton asked, breathlessly.

"Never. I kept my secret and have always let her think she is keeping hers. I was changed from that moment. The experience was my turning-point. Young as I was, it led me to the reading of philosophy, and I finally came to see that all suffering is for our good if only we look deeply enough into the meaning of life. I can see now that my trouble has broadened me, and that my mother's has made her the gentlest, most wonderful woman on earth. Oh, she is—she is! I am not saying it because she is all I have; it is because she is what she is and has been. She is now in California, but she will be home soon. She works very hard. She travels a great deal, and we cannot live together; but we meet often when she is in New York. I go to see her at her boarding-house and take her out to dinner and places of amusement like a sweetheart. She is young-looking—people take her for my sister. Now I have told you more than I have ever told any one. You have been so kind to me that I wanted you to know all about me—absolutely all."

"I am glad you trusted me to that extent," the other returned.

CHAPTER V

CROFTON had thrown himself back on his bed of leaves and was looking at the moonlit sky. He had never felt more depressed in his life. The most regrettable experiences of his past were crawling through his memory like magnified vermin, leaving their slimy tracks upon his consciousness. In what way was he better than the fiend who was the author of this helpless boy's agony? Suddenly he sat up and glanced at the poetic profile in the moonlight beside him.

"Was—was your father young when—when he left—deserted your mother?" he inquired.

"Yes; I caught that much in the talk I overheard," Socrates answered. "He was only a few years older than she, and she was only seventeen or eighteen. He was proud, and rich, and ashamed to do his duty before the world, and she was very poor and at that time uneducated. She taught herself afterward. She often said it was for my sake that she studied and worked so hard night and day."

"And you think it is likely that he is still alive?" Crofton asked.

"Yes, I am pretty sure of it, and I think my mother's sole object now is to keep us from meeting. She wants me to think that I am the legitimate son of a man who could not live to do his duty by me and her. Oh, I don't want to see him! I sometimes shudder over the thought of meeting him even in eternity. I revel in the thought of Paradise with her, but the idea of his being there mars

THE INNER LAW

the fancy, almost wipes it out of my hopes. Oh no! I pray to God to keep us apart. I am afraid of meeting him face to face. I am at peace now, and sometimes with the eyes of a mystic I actually *see* my way on, on into the 'light which never lay on land or sea,' and that man, absent though he is, gives me my only doubt, my only sense of insecurity."

"Your only doubt!" Crofton repeated, tentatively, as he bent down almost in awe over the twitching poetic face.

"Yes, the thought of him fills me with a great, unconquerable fear in regard to my real self." Socrates sat up again. His jaw was set firmly; his long fingers were clenched. "It may be that I am only having a respite at the hands of a sinister fate. I sometimes fear that I may be destined to further trouble. I may meet that man, you see, and *have* to kill him. I've done it in my thoughts, in awful nightmares. I may have to do it in fact. God may keep us apart—Satan may throw us together. If we met I would not be able to check my rage." The voice of the boy rose, cracked, and quivered. "I have felt my fingers at his throat a hundred times. He was not my father in any holy sense. He was hell's agent in the production of the worst part of me. See—see? I'm crazy—the thought of his deed sets my brain on fire."

"Don't, don't! Stop, stop!" Crofton implored. "These memories are doing you no good. You are not yourself. You surprise me. I did not dream that it was in you."

"Oh, how can I keep from being bitter?" The boy covered his face with his hands, and Crofton saw his fine chest rise under a welling sob. "Why couldn't I have a father whom I could love and who would love me—I, who so passionately desire it? You see how I love to be with you, how I care for your company more than I do for the company of fellows of my own age. It is because I sometimes fancy—oh, you'll say I'm a silly, sentimental fool! but I play at the game of son-and-father when I

THE INNER LAW

am with you. I hang upon your words; I try to please you—I almost swoon with joy when you say that my ideas actually help you. Oh, I know it is a dream, an empty, hysterical figment born from the sheer poverty of my yearning for the impossible, but you—you are what I would have created for a poor boy's father had I been God and God been me."

"Don't, don't, don't!" Crofton groaned. "You don't know how you are tearing my heart out. I love you, my poor boy—I don't know why, but I love you, and I am unworthy of what you say. I can't hide under a false cloak and look you in the face. I want you to think well of me, but I cannot gain your respect by a deliberate lie. I am bad—as bad as your father ever was. I—"

"Oh no, you are not!" Socrates firmly shook his head. "You couldn't act as he did. It isn't in you. Your face, your voice, your pleading, suffering eyes, your constant kindness to me whom you have known such a short time, prove what you are. What you have said in so justly criticizing my stories and poems, and the gentle way you have spoken for fear of discouraging me, have won all the heart I have. And it is not only I who like you—everybody down at the camp feels the same way toward you. They have said so time and again. When you fail to come any day they speak of it with regret. At the lower end of the line they watch for you to get off the boat, and, when you are coming, they shout the news from tent to tent up to us. They are even now planning a camp-fire dinner in your honor. They are all contributing toward it. Oh no, no, if my father had been like you I would ask no more."

"But I tell you, my boy, that I am not what you think I am. Your friends may like me, but it is because they don't know me as I am. I like them all because they are better than I am. I can't hide my appreciation of them; they perhaps feel it and respond with unselfish

THE INNER LAW

friendship; but it is because they think I am the opposite of what I actually am."

"What you are saying is absurd," Socrates declared, with a firm, wan smile. "I don't want to hear more of it. I want to be like you. I am proud of the fact that I am tall and slender like you are, and have the same broad shoulders. The other day while we were bathing I noticed that your instep was high like mine, your ankles small, and that your finger-nails are shaped like mine, and was proud to find it so. I have never before cared how I looked, but now I would like to look like you—I'd like to *be* like you."

After that silence fell between them. The lapping of the water on the rocky shore, the shrill piping of crickets in the wood behind them were the only sounds of the still night. They were both fatigued. Crofton saw that his companion had closed his eyes. The face upturned to the moon was beautiful in all its lines. The boy was soon asleep, but the man lay awake, his brain charged with the force of a hundred self-accusations that besieged him like enemies rising from the dark. His uncle's first despairing warning; then his sin; next his uncle's discovery and the choice laid before him; then that deliberate sale of his soul, followed by those blighting years in Europe and his brother's awful death—these things and many others tormented him. More painful than all was the faith in him held by the young sleeper at his side. Hours passed. He was still awake. Presently Socrates stirred, drew his feet up, rolled over, rose, and stood blankly staring through the moonlight at the river. For a moment he remained so, then he bent down and looked into Crofton's face without a word or expression of consciousness on his own. Then he slowly turned into the path they had traversed and began to walk along it.

"Where are you going?" Crofton asked, anxiously.

At this Socrates paused, turned half around, and began

THE INNER LAW

to mutter: "I was—was— I want—want— Why, what is it? Where am—am I? Oh, I'm sorry! I was walking in my sleep. I've waked you, and you were tired."

"I was not asleep," Crofton said, taking his arm. "Come, lie down again. When I was young I used to be that way myself, but outgrew it at about your age. You will outgrow it, too, I'm sure."

"Perhaps so; it only happens once in a great while now," Socrates said. "Oh, I had such a beautiful dream! I dreamt that I had been dreaming all the horrible things I told you to-night—that they were dreams and not realities. It seemed to me that I was sick of the fever; as I once was when a child, and you were bending over me telling me that you yourself were my father. Oh, oh! why am I tormented this way? Is God good? Is He—is He?"

"I am sorry you feel as you do." Crofton answered the best he could. He remembered his own exaggerated pride of birth when he was young, and his heart was torn with sympathy for the boy who was suffering so keenly.

Socrates was lying on his bed of leaves now. The sadness of his placid face seemed laid on by the relentless moonbeams. After a while he was asleep. The expression changed, a smile lifted the corners of the tender mouth. His companion heard him muttering:

"Mother! Mother!"

Crofton returned to the city early the next morning, and when he found himself again in the busy streets a brooding sense of having no particular thing to do oppressed him to the point of actual pain. In such moods he had often sought the slums of the great town, where he had come into contact with the poorest of the poor, so now he took the Elevated train to Mulberry Bend Park on the Lower East Side. His clothing was soiled from

THE INNER LAW

his long walk the day before; his straw hat had been stained by a fall into a stream while it was coated with dust; his collar was wrinkled, his tie carelessly arranged, and his shoes needed polishing; but the thought that he was thus less conspicuous in such sordid surroundings as he was now in appealed to him. In fact, all that day, as he wandered about among the Italian push-cart men, the Jewish venders of old clothing, or sat chatting with some drunkard or clerk out of employment in the little park, he was, in his imagination, an actual outcast himself with scarcely a penny in his pocket. It afforded him a strange, mystic sense of peace and even enjoyment which a year previous would have seemed wholly absurd to him. Wayfarers, tramps, men with gay, drink-flushed faces, men with daredevil attitudes who scowled and swore at the policemen that pushed them along, greeted him with a cordial smile of fellowship. He never refused the pennies they pleaded for and which they may have thought he needed for himself. In truth, he frequently gave money he knew was to be spent for rum. An odd thing in this connection happened to him that day. A shabbily dressed young man approached him as he stood near a bubbling fountain of drinking-water.

"Say, boss," the man said, "you look like a good chap. Give a fellow a dime for a drink. I am dying for it. You may not be a drinking man, and don't know what the feeling is like, but if you are you will understand."

Crofton gave him the money. "Thanks, boss, thanks," the man said, gratefully, and left. Crofton watched him cross the street. There was a bar-room on the opposite corner, and he expected to see him enter it. He did not do so, however, but passed on to the shop of a baker two doors below and entered. Wondering over this, Crofton crossed the street and looked through the plate-glass window of the shop, seeing the man buying two loaves of bread from a girl behind the counter. Hardly knowing

THE INNER LAW

what to think of the occurrence, Crofton was turning away when the man looked up suddenly, and, recognizing him, flushed red and dropped his eyes to the floor. Taking his parcel under his arm, the man hurried out, still red in the face. Crofton had started on, but the man followed him with quick, dogged strides and soon overtook him.

"You think I'm a blooming liar, I guess," he began, sheepishly. "Well, I *did* lie to you, boss, but I didn't mean no harm. I'm sorry, though, for you may need that dime yourself. Say, I asked you for money for a drink, and I had a reason for it—reason enough for me, anyway. My wife and kids are hungry, boss. I was fired from my job as janitor two weeks ago, and can't get another. Well, why did I lie? Because it is like this: do you know, boss, it's God's truth what I'm telling you. I ain't lying now. I have asked for bread-money dozens of times and got turned down in every case, but when I ask for the price of a drink the average sporting man gives it to me without a word. I learned that men are like that, boss, when I was a rummy myself before the kids was born. Most men know what it is to want a drink after a soaking spree, but they don't know the feeling of being without bread for sick women and little children."

Crofton took the man's arm, and they moved along the sidewalk together. He was buoyed up by that strange spiritual element which had so powerfully influenced him of late. He had so much money in his purse that he was ashamed to draw it out before the man. However, he remembered that he had put a ten-dollar bill into a blank envelope for a certain purpose, and that it was in the breast pocket of his coat. He got it out from among the letters and memoranda about it, and, without opening it, gave it to the man.

"Take it home with you," he said. "It may help you." The man stared. He shifted the parcel under his arm awkwardly and hesitated. "Is it a tract?" he asked.

THE INNER LAW

"Oh, I'm done with them, boss. I've read them till my head spins. They don't help the likes o' me."

"It is not a tract; it is a little money," Crofton answered.

The man's grimy fingers quivered with excitement as they opened the envelope; they contracted like mechanical prongs as they fumbled the green bill. The bread slid from beneath his arm and fell to the pavement. The man's form swayed as he stooped to take it up, still clutching the money.

"Good God!" he cried, with an incredulous stare. "You can't mean it, boss."

"Yes, I mean it for you and your family."

"Honest? You do—you do?"

"Yes, and here is my name and address," Crofton went on. "If you can't get work come and see me, will you? Promise me."

The man made no answer. His eyes were filling with the transcendent light Crofton had begun to see, under rare conditions, in certain human faces.

"Say, boss, you are the *real* thing—you are—you are! You make me feel—feel—" He was beginning to cry.

Crofton took his arm again and held it tenderly as he led him along. He looked away, for he heard the guttural sounds his companion was making as he crushed down his sobs. The man's arm was shaking, and its muscles were contracting convulsively. On the corner they stopped. The man held out his hand.

"You are the real thing, boss," he repeated. "I didn't know it could be found anywhere in this great hole of hell."

Crofton pressed the hard fingers gently. "Promise me to come to see me—or, better still, let me come to see you and your children. I am fond of children. I have none of my own, and my life is lonely. Give me your address."

The man pointed down the street to a disreputable-

THE INNER LAW

looking tenement-house. "There, top floor above the junk-shop," he said. "We was to be ousted to-morrow for the rent, but this will fix that," he added, with a chuckle. "You may come if you like, boss, but it is a terrible place. My wife will be ashamed to have you see us like we are, for she is used to a better deal than she is getting; but you can come if you feel like it. I hope God will bless you for this."

"I will come soon," Crofton promised, and he intended not only to go, but to help the man and his family in some substantial way, as he intended from that day on to help all human sufferers. What a life lay before him—what a glorious life! He was forgetting himself—actually forgetting himself, and living in the lives and emotions of others. He was discovering that infinite peace could only be had for one's self by helping the needy.

CHAPTER VI

ABOUT three o'clock Crofton returned to his room. He had just started to take a bath and change his soiled clothes when the only maid-servant in the house, a rather slovenly girl, brought up Farnham's card.

"Farnham!" he exclaimed, inwardly and aghast, for he was in no mood to meet this particular man.

"Where is he?" Crofton inquired.

"He is waiting at the foot of the stairs in the hall," the girl replied. "I invited him in the parlor, but he wouldn't go—said he thought you'd let him run up here, as he is an old friend."

"Up here? Well, tell him to come up," Crofton said, recklessly, almost angrily, and the maid departed to do his bidding.

Crofton stood holding the door of his room open. Presently he saw the portly form of Farnham almost filling the narrow stairway as he puffed up the two flights, sliding a fat hand holding a cane on the walnut balustrade.

"Well, well, well!" he panted, as he reached the top and saw Crofton. "What in the name of the devil does this mean?"

"I don't understand you." Crofton extended his hand, a flush of inner resentment on his face.

Farnham clung to the reluctant fingers with his gloved hand, and stared quite curiously into Crofton's eyes. "Why, your hiding in a place like this, old chap?" Farnham was sweeping Crofton's bedraggled attire from top to bottom with a bland stare of perplexity. "I tried to

THE INNER LAW

find you three weeks ago when I was here, but failed. Your bankers acted queer, I thought. They intimated that they knew your whereabouts, but were bound in confidence not to inform any one, so I had to go back home without seeing you."

"I am sorry," Crofton answered, lamely, even helplessly. "Come into my room."

"Your *room!* Have you only one? My Lord! old chap, is *this* it?" Farnham stood in the doorway, his hat and cane in hand, his eyes roving over the bare white walls, the almost rugless floor, the old-fashioned bed, the small, crude table in the center, the cheap bureau which matched nothing else in the room.

"Yes, this is all I have at present," Crofton faltered, abashed, against his will. "But it is comfortable; it is good enough; it is quiet. I couldn't stand the hotel; it was too noisy. You see, I—I wanted a place where I could be wholly undisturbed and to myself. Sit down. Let me have your things."

He took the hat, cane, and gloves of his wondering guest and laid them on the bed.

"But why, if I may ask, did you choose exactly *this* sort of a joint?" Farnham stared at his friend's back, now so willingly turned upon him. "Why, the door-mat has holes in it; I almost jerked the bell-handle out of its socket and waited an endless length of time before that horrid creature stuck her frowsy head out of the door under the stoop and asked what I wanted. 'Do you mean the gent in second front?' she asked, as if she had never heard your name before. Say, Cart, old boy, what in the name of common sense does all this mean?"

"Mean?" Crofton asked, helplessly, to gain time. "How did you get my address?"

"From your sister; she heard I was coming to New York and asked me to look you up. She said you had written her a short letter from this street and number,

THE INNER LAW

but that you had asked her to reply in care of your bankers. Frankly, she is puzzled, as I'm puzzled, as all your friends down home are puzzled."

"I can't see what you are puzzled about?" Crofton replied, with chilling restraint. "I am simply living as best suits my own individual taste, and—and present ideas of duty. What do you mean?"

Farnham twirled his short, fat fingers between his pudgy knees, contracting the thick lids of his eyes, and continued to stare at his friend, who was now drawing a rickety chair forward and sitting down in it.

"Why, Carter, there is such a change in you that I hardly know what to make of it. Your—your looks, for instance. You need a shave. Your clothes are out of style, and as—really, old chap, they are as dirty as a tramp's; your hands are as rough as a plumber's; your hair has not been trimmed for a month."

"I've been roughing it across the river," Crofton explained. "I was just about to put myself to rights when you came. I live outdoors a great deal of late. I like it. It seems to me that it is the first thing I have ever genuinely liked."

"I see, I see." But it was plain that Farnham was still mystified and wondering where he should next put the probe he had come to use. "The truth is, the first thing which struck me as being odd—unlike you, wholly unlike you—was the fact that when I wrote you in regard to the rise in your railroad interest you did not even answer the letter. There I was chuckling over our good luck, and all the rest who had put money in my scheme, and you did not care enough about it to write me. Any sound business man would resent that, old chap, even from a man of artistic temperament such as you have. I confess it riled me. I'm justly proud of what that road has done, not only for us, but for our State. Between you and me, I have been spoken of as our next Governor, but

THE INNER LAW

I shall not enter the race. The fact that a lot of leading men want me is compliment enough. The pay would not amount to much, you know, and it would take up my time. I have always been interested in you, and this damned queer turn you have taken is anything but rational. Then there is Milicent. She—"

"Milicent? What about her?" Crofton broke in, more and more angered by his sheer inability to express himself satisfactorily to this densely materialistic friend.

"Why, the poor woman is upset, to say the least," Farnham said, more delicately now. "She cannot talk of anything but the way you have acted since your brother died. She says you did not inform her of his death till he was buried, and that during your short stay in Atlanta afterward you scarcely spoke to her, but moped about the house as if—as if your mind was affected. Then she got hold of the information, in some way, that you have provided most extravagantly for the woman Henry was keeping when he died."

"I have satisfactory reasons for everything I have done in that case, and as for my unhappiness over my brother's death, that is my own private matter," Crofton blurted out.

Farnham now locked his twirling fingers tightly. He cleared his throat and bit the ends of his mustache, which he swept between his teeth with a hesitating tongue. "I see, as a true friend to you, Carter, that I must be more frank with you," he said, his glance resting unsteadily on the floor. "Carter, I happen to know personally that you have given considerable sums of money to certain other individuals in Atlanta. I don't say they are not deserving—that is neither here nor there, but Milicent got wind of it and, naturally, as your sister—"

"I can't see why you are continually bringing in *her* name," Crofton cried, impatiently. "Heaven knows I don't owe her anything, and she is well provided for.

THE INNER LAW

Those faithful old friends of my boyhood wrote me that they were in great need, and I simply instructed my agents to provide for them in a substantial way. That is all. Do you realize that I am a bachelor, and have less and less use as the years go by for the fortune which my father left me, and which is growing instead of diminishing? I enjoyed helping those people—enjoyed it more than anything I ever did. I have read their very grateful letters over many times. Say, Farnham, it is my turn to be frank with you—if I can—if I can. I don't know whether I can possibly make my position clear to—to a man like you, but I will try. You know I am a student of philosophy—I have read everything I could lay my hands on. I know now that I am essentially an idealist, as my uncle Tom was. I have had a great awakening to my true inner self. It is hard to speak to a practical business man of these things, for he simply cannot understand them—can't see them from the same point of view. Charley, I know what I am going to say will be regarded as sheer foolishness; still, I am going to say it. It is my right. I am going to say that after I was left that fortune, and began trying to buy only material pleasures with it, I was leading a life that was contrary to the infinitely high spiritual law which governs the universe. I know almost as well as any of the ancient seers did that the hoarding of and idly subsisting upon personal possessions is fundamentally wrong. I know now that the humblest, poorest man in the world—a black-fingered cobbler at his bench, a laborer in a filthy sewer—is happier, more sane than any rich man in his mansion or on his yacht. Say what you will, think what you will, this is the truth. I have begun to demonstrate it in my own life. I know what I am talking about."

Farnham's heavy cheeks twitched; he blinked; he avoided his friend's eager stare. He forced a stiff smile to his face and then wiped it away with his glove.

THE INNER LAW

"You are too deep for me," he stammered; "but I'm afraid—the honest truth is, I'm afraid you are—are, well, fanatical, to say the least. What you are saying is this—if I may make a personal application of it—you think I, for instance, have no absolute right to enjoy as I will what my brain has earned. You speak of the joy you are getting out of your new ideas and habits. Let me tell you that I get joy and satisfaction out of *mine*. I'm satisfied—you bet I am. I don't want to live like a pig in a filthy pen, or drag my wife and children into one. Why, my friend, what you are saying is an insult—a downright insult. I oughtn't to do as I am doing—that is the sum and substance of your crazy argument."

"No, no, I can't say that it applies to *you*—you don't understand," Crofton corrected, quickly. "The thing I am talking about seems to be demanded—that's the word—*demanded* only of certain individuals. From the very beginning you have been a man who, it seems to me, was created to be exactly what you are, to feel as you feel, and to live as you live."

"And you are different—is that it?" A sneer, half of pity, half of indignation, crept over Farnham's flushed face.

"I don't know how to say it without appearing egotistical, Charley, but that *is* what I mean," Crofton answered, candidly. "I think I was given, early in life, a sort of mystic comprehension of ultimate spiritual verities which practical minds do not receive. I deliberately turned my back upon them, and have suffered in consequence ever since. I know that I have lived wrongly—I know it because, through it all, Charley, I never had one moment's peace of mind. I was in a constant turmoil, tossed like a ball between matter and spirit. When I got back to America I had an awakening. I met the wonderful woman whose life I wrecked, and saw endless reproach on her beautiful face. Later, my brother's death staggered me, stunned me. I saw that I was going to die in torture as

THE INNER LAW

he did, and for the same sort of offenses. You don't know all about that, and I won't go into it, but the whole thing has haunted me day and night. If you had turned over millions of dollars to me as my share of the profits in our investment, I would hardly have cared to see the money safe in a bank. That is why I don't answer your business letters. The very thought of wealth only increased the terror of my condition. Do you think you could interest a man in the inheritance of a heap of gold who is standing on the scaffold, looking at the black cap in the sheriff's hands? I have been standing there—I swear I've been standing there—ever since Henry died. There is no use in my trying to make this clear to you. You could never dream of what it is like without going through it with exactly my temperament and exactly my damnable past oozing from the pores of your soul. History is full of men's names who grew sick of material possessions, aims, and accomplishments, and in sheer desperation humbly sought God in solitude and renunciation of self. It was exactly so with me, but I have found the way out—I know it. I discovered, when I left off expensive habits, sought the companionship of simple people, learned to love them unselfishly—I say, when I did those things, Charley, I began to live in the light. It is hard for me to say these things, for I know you think I am a fool."

"Oh, I don't know that I think *that*," Farnham answered, awkwardly, as he nervously stroked his mustache. "But to be honest with you—honest, man to man, if you want me to tell you just what I think, I will do so."

"I'll be glad to hear it," Crofton replied, tremblingly, for he had spoken with great force and energy.

"Well, then, I think that you have perhaps inherited what may be called a—a slight mental taint in your family. Your uncle became—well, *queer*, to say the least, at about your age, when he began leading a lonely life somewhat like yours at present. He became careless of

THE INNER LAW

his financial affairs, and the way he acted in taking Henry and that woman in with him at the last was a crazy thing to do, considering the conservative and respectable locality it happened in. You see, your own provision for the woman—”

“It was for Henry’s sake,” Crofton interrupted. “He was dying and was disturbed over the matter. You may call that an insane act if you like, but it is only your opinion. The greatest men of history are my standards—men like—”

“Yes, but the cool-headed view of a man of my stripe may be of more practical value to you than the ideas of them all,” Farnham broke in. “Say, Carter, I feel it my duty as a friend, and a close business associate of yours, to tell you frankly that, in my judgment, your sister is going to give you serious trouble down at home.”

“Serious trouble? What do you mean?”

“Well, women are cranky, as a rule, and where their moneyed interests are concerned they often act impulsively and sometimes without reason. Now you know Atlanta has plenty of shyster lawyers who are on the lookout for cases, and if they choose to poison the mind of a woman, well—”

“I don’t understand,” Crofton said, irritably. “I don’t see what you are driving at.”

“Well, I’ll be plain. The truth is your sister has an abnormal love for money. She has shown it by the way she has hoarded the income on her property, and the quiet, inexpensive way she lives. Now it is my opinion that she has simply gone to a certain shrewd lawyer and asked for legal advice as to how she ought to act as your next of kin.”

“Surely you can’t mean—” Crofton began, but allowed his astonished voice to die away in silence.

“Yes, I mean that it looks at present as if she is thinking of restraining you by process of law from an irrational

THE INNER LAW

disposition of your effects. She has, it seems, a letter from you containing some of the odd views you have just expressed to me, and that, along with the ill-advised provision made to Henry's companion, and sums given to others in Atlanta, she adduces as proof that you are of unsound mind, and an unsafe guardian of her prospective rights."

"Oh, I see!" Crofton said, bitterly, and he flared up suddenly. "There's proof enough of what I was saying about the hellish effects of money. You see what it will do in her case? She is rich; she is a crabbed, lonely, almost friendless old maid, and yet she wants to add to her pile of useless coin at the expense of my reputation for sanity. She would weld the chains of sordid law about the spiritual desires I have toward the close of a life which has been of no use to humanity or to God. Well, do you think the courts would listen to her?"

"To be absolutely honest with you, I think they might," Farnham returned. "As long as you remain unmarried Milicent has a certain claim on you and the money left by your father. You see, Carter, the courts of our country are not governed by the strange ideas you have recently acquired. I will speak plainly. I have myself been on juries chosen to settle disputes in families, and, frankly, if I did not know you too intimately to be a juror on this particular case, and had to serve under oath, I would be compelled to throw my vote against your policy. It does not appear rational to me, and, as a practical man, I can't help it. If our laws were made by men with such visionary ideas as you hold the world would drop to pieces in no time. As I look at it, nothing of importance has ever been built up which was not founded on some man's effort to help himself. Every invention we have and enjoy—our telephones, wireless, steamships, flying-machines, come from the desire of men to profit *personally* by their ideas. Our own railroad,

THE INNER LAW

which is helping the South market its products, and doing good in many ways, grew up out of my own determination to show a certain bunch of scoffing, tight-fisted speculators that I could make more money than they could. Edison declares immortality is a silly dream. By George! now I think of it, you wouldn't have the very money in question, which you say you are using to a good end, if your father had not looked out for number one and piled it up in doing so. Your sister is looking out for number one, and she may tie up your whole self-sacrificing scheme in a knot so tight that you will not be able to move hand or foot."

"Perhaps so, perhaps so," Crofton sighed. "I know I am standing by myself in these things. I find few in actual life who think as I do, or yearn for what I yearn for. When I enter a great library, however, I find the works of the believers in the idea staring at me from the shelves, and take them down and caress them. And masses of people are reading them who never dream of following their precepts. Why is that—in the name of common sense, why are they devouring the works of men—turning them into classics as the years pass—of men whose theories they denounce as empty dreams? The face of the earth is dotted with churches founded on the philosophy of a Man who held that material possessions are a curse, and that total self-renunciation is the only firm step toward eternal life. On Sundays the bells ring, and the people throng the streets in smug attire, going to worship the Man whose best advice they tread underfoot. Tell you, as I have told you, as I have written Milicent, that His law is the only rational law of life, and you reprove me—she takes me to court. You say if I were married she would be powerless to interfere with me. I know now that I shall never marry—that the only woman I desire more than life itself is beyond my reach for ever. You know who I mean. As for fighting my sister in the public eye,

THE INNER LAW

I am not sure that I would make any defense at all. To fight for that fortune would be as bad as amassing it. It has been a curse to me. If the law so decides, it may go. If it remains in my hands I'll try to use it for the good of others. If it goes to her she can gloat over it as a miser over his gold, and when her time comes she may die as Henry died, horrified by the memory of his life-long mistakes."

"You frighten me, old man; you really do," Farnham exclaimed. "You are going too far—you really are. Your state of mind is a dangerous one. I hate to say it, but you may hear it from others—in fact, Milicent is sure to allow it to be brought forward if she *does* go to law. The truth is, your father's life ended in an asylum; your uncle died a miserable recluse from the world; and your brother—"

"I know all that." Crofton smiled wistfully. "I know they might be regarded as having unsound minds by your world, but I am not mad in any sense. Through the frequent companionship with one person scarcely out of his teens, the books I have read, the spiritual experiences I have had, I know that I am wiser than I used to be. In all ages men who have dared to stand by their best inner convictions have been ridiculed by the masses. I have groveled in the mire, and fed upon the scum of existence. My pitiful life, such as it has been, was given me for some inscrutable purpose. I was born to experience exactly what I have experienced, and to come out of material darkness into spiritual light, as I am slowly coming out—slowly, but it seems surely."

"You can't be serious when you say you would not contest your sister's action," Farnham returned. "That surely would be madness."

"Madness to shrink from having my father's, my brother's, my uncle's miserable lives unrolled before the public gaze, now that they are dead and at rest? I'd

THE INNER LAW

rather give up ten fortunes such as the paltry one in question. Oh yes, she may have it, if it comes to that! At present my daily companions consider me a poor man, and their friendship on that basis is the sweetest experience I have ever known. I quake with the fear that they may accidentally learn who I am and no longer consider me wholly one of them. Farnham, there is such a thing as actually being born again. The time comes in the middle life of certain persons when they are completely changed—the things they once cared for no longer appeal to them. They seek God in humility, prayer, and self-immolation, and His light finally dawns upon them."

"You are too deep for me," Farnham said, with a sickly, reluctant smile—"too deep or too crazy, one or the other. I think we had better change the subject. We'll never agree. Say, my train leaves at two o'clock to-morrow morning, and this evening will be a lonely one for me unless we spend it together. Meet me at my hotel. I have box seats for a good play. We'll have dinner together, see the show, take in a cabaret supper, and be as jolly as we used to be in Paris and Berlin. Then I'll take a taxi for the station. What do you say? It will do you good. You are killing yourself in this hole in the wall, brooding over your brother's death and other like things."

Crofton hesitated for a moment, but finally accepted.

Farnham smiled triumphantly and rose to go. "I'll make you more cheerful," he said, dubiously, slapping Crofton on the shoulder. "You've got to pull yourself out of this. Your uncle's morbid solitude ruined him, and you have taken on his tendencies. Good-by till I see you."

CHAPTER VII

THE evening spent with Farnham in the conventional world of fashion was like a garish nightmare to the man with his newly acquired vision. He was wearing evening dress for the first time in several months, and the black coat and trousers, the snowy whiteness of the stiff waistcoat, shirt, and tie struck him as being the almost degrading uniform of men who are held down from the actual heights of life by sheer trivialities. He wondered what his plain friends of the riverside encampment, the poor families he knew on the East Side, would think if they saw him there. No longer would they open their hearts in brotherly confidence, for they would know that he was an impostor, a man who had entered their simple fraternity behind a mask. Farnham's easy chat at dinner about politics, commerce, interstate railway regulations, the stock-market, and comments on the costly gowns and jewels of the women in the room, were foreign matters expressed in a foreign tongue. Crofton observed the tired look of the bald, middle-aged waiter who served them, pitied him, wondered if the man had a wife and children at home, and if they longed to rise above the condition of servitude of their wage-earner. And when Farnham had excused himself to go out to look at the "ticker," leaving him alone at the table, he ventured to ask the man if the tips were good in that house.

"Not now, sir," the waiter replied, with a sigh. "We used to pick up a good deal, but the talk in the papers against tipping has almost stopped it. Not only that,

THE INNER LAW

but our wages are lower and living is out of sight. Some of the public treat us like dogs unfit to eat the bones they leave on their plates. Some waiters know how to make it pay, but I am getting old and slow."

"I am this gentleman's guest to-night," Crofton answered, with a furtive look toward the door. "I wouldn't like to offend him, and yet I'd like to give you something." He put his hand into his pocket and took out a five-dollar bill, folded it, and slipped it into the waiter's palm.

"Thank you. I understand, and God bless you, sir," the astonished man exclaimed as he quickly concealed the money. "I can't explain everything, for your friend is coming back, but I needed it, sir—oh, I needed it badly at home! Do you know, sir, this is actually an answer to a prayer? I've been praying for help to-night, and, you see, it has come—it has come! God will bless you, sir—He will, He will—as sure as His stars are in the sky to-night He will. I am going to ask Him to bless you—that is, if you don't mind? Some men I meet don't believe in God, but if you—"

"I believe in God," Crofton said, fervently, surprised at his own candor, "and I want your prayers." He then did a thing that was unknown to conventional café life: he extended his hand and pressed the thin fingers of the servant, while a lump of emotion filled his throat with delicious pain.

"'Sh!"—the beaming waiter bent to fill his tray with the dishes—"your friend is coming. God bless you. I shall never forget this night—never!"

At the play, in the box Farnham had provided, Crofton sat all but unconscious of the drift of the drama. He was glad of the opportunity to escape Farnham's talk. The whole thing, compared to the recent nights and days spent out in nature, under the skies, with open-hearted, simple men and women, jarred harshly upon him. After the play Farnham begged him to go with him to a cabaret

THE INNER LAW

where there was a good stage performance; but he declined, saying that he was tired and was in the habit of going early to bed. He no longer cared what his friend would think of his mood and actions, and yearned to be alone with his thoughts. Above all, he wanted to think of the waiter and the man's appealing manner and words. The evening, after all, he told himself, had not been thrown away.

"Well, then, I'll say good-by here," Farnham said at the door of the theater. "I'll keep you posted about that unpleasant family matter, and if I can help you in regard to it I shall do so. I think I can influence Milicent—I really do. She listens to me, and I'll give her some strong advice. By George! I'll tell her you are going to get married—that will settle it. In that case she'd have her fees to pay for nothing."

As he walked to the Subway station through the glaring white light of the theatrical section, Crofton had a boundless sense of relief in being rid of the company of the man who could not understand him in the slightest, and who was now all but a gross mystery to him.

Indeed, the next morning he waked with a haunting sense of having lowered himself the night before. He wondered how he could have led that sort of life for so many years, and how Farnham could still rejoice in it.

Immediately after breakfast he went to the ferry and crossed the river to the encampment. He found Socrates in his tent with a pencil and a pad, writing a poem. The young man looked up with a beaming face and smiled.

"I want you to read it," he said, flushing modestly. "I may be mistaken, but I think it is the best I have done. I have almost made up my mind to offer it to a magazine. I may, and I may not."

Crofton sat down on the canvas cot beside the boy and read the lines. He was astonished at the philosophic depth and rhythmic beauty of the poem.

THE INNER LAW

"It is great," he said. "You must publish it."

"But I really don't know how to go about it," Socrates said, trying to conceal his delight.

"I've had some experience in such things, and I'll send it for you if you will let me," Crofton proposed.

"Oh! will you?" the boy exclaimed; "and do you really think it has any chance at all of acceptance?"

"I am sure of it," Crofton replied. "You are destined to be a great writer. You have the true creative sense and deep mystic originality."

Some one called Socrates from a boat on the shore, and he ran out, leaving the poem in Crofton's hands. Crofton put the manuscript into his pocket, reclined on the cot, and looked out through the door of the tent. He heard Socrates and Jimmy singing. The atmosphere held the faint blue which composed the denser sky above; the lazy waves lapped the rocky beach; the sea-gulls were curving and dipping over the water; the towering cliffs behind the tent seemed the verdure-clothed breast of nature soothing the living and growing things which crept and took root upon it.

"I am a new man—actually a new man!" Crofton chuckled. "A year ago I would have been envious of this boy's work, or too materialistic to appreciate it, but now I comprehend his genius and had rather see him succeed than to succeed myself. Marvelous, marvelous!"

The loss of his usual sleep the night before had told upon him. He felt drowsy, closed his eyes, and slept with half-conscious delight for several hours. When he waked he heard Jimmy and Socrates conversing in low tones over the fire in front of the tent.

"He likes his coffee strong," he heard the poet saying. "Let me put it in. I know exactly how to measure it. The other day he said my coffee was fine."

THE INNER LAW

"Well, he liked the 'spuds' I roasted in the sand," Jimmy retorted. "You burn them every time."

Crofton closed his eyes. The droning voices were like far-off music to his ears. "Hush!" Socrates said, "I'll see if he is awake." Thereupon he cautiously parted the tent-curtains and looked in, catching Crofton's smiling glance.

"Dinner is almost ready," he announced. "You've had a nice long nap, haven't you?"

"Yes. I was up later than usual last night."

"Isn't that strange?" Socrates said, entering the tent and sitting on a camp-stool, his fine shock of hair against the sloping, overhead canvas. "I knew you were up last night—awake, at least."

"How could you know?" Crofton asked, attracted by the naïve gravity of the boy's manner and tone.

"I *felt* it," was the answer. "I am that way with a few—a very few—my mother all my life, and lately with you. I couldn't sleep last night. I had been rowing, swimming, and gathering driftwood all day, and was quite fagged out, still I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking of you and knew—or thought, at least—that you were awake."

"I was," Crofton said.

"But that wasn't all," Socrates went on. "I had the feeling that certain things were happening that you didn't like. It seemed to me that you were nervous and upset—different from what you are with us. I had that feeling till about midnight; then all at once it lifted and I felt that whatever it was that disturbed you was over with. Then I went to sleep."

"It is a good example of thought-transference," Crofton said. "I was awake and feeling uncomfortable 'till after midnight."

"I always know when you are coming over here," Socrates went on. "I knew it to-day. I told Jimmy."

THE INNER LAW

It is a queer thing—telepathy is, for you can't experiment with it. Experimenting always kills it. That is why some scientists refuse to accept it. But it is true, and in the future it will be better understood and actually put to use."

"I am sure you are right," Crofton returned.

Jimmy, outside, was striking a goblet with a fork and making a tinkling sound. "There is no telepathy in that." Socrates laughed, merrily. "That is the dinner-bell. Let's go. I'm as hungry as a bear."

CHAPTER VIII

AN unexpected thing was to happen to Crofton. He was riding one morning on the top of a 'bus up Riverside Drive, when he noticed a lady dressed in brown on a corner signaling to the driver to stop. It was Lydia. From his position on one of the front seats he could not see her again till she had ascended the narrow, winding stair and was taking one of the rear seats. Then he had a full view of her. His heart was in his mouth. He felt cold from head to foot, and trembled with excitement. She was viewing the river with evident interest, and did not notice him, although he sat furtively and even fearfully watching her. She was even more beautiful than when he had last seen her. At One Hundred and Sixteenth Street she rang the bell and stopped the 'bus. Still she had not noticed him. He was tempted to go back and assist her, but she was already on the way down. Suddenly he realized that he was about to miss the only chance he might ever have to appeal to her once more, and with great trepidation he followed her to the pavement. Indeed, he was so close behind her that he could have touched her arm. When the 'bus had left, she turned, saw him at her side, started, and uttered a little cry of blended surprise and protest.

"Oh, Lydia, you must forgive me!" he humbly and huskily pleaded. "I cannot let you go again without seeing you. I must speak to you, if only for a moment."

It struck him that a faint light of sympathy lay in her

THE INNER LAW

beautiful eyes for a bare instant; then he saw her face hardening with displeasure.

"What is it that you want to say?" she asked, biting her lip and stabbing the pavement with her sunshade. "I have to cross the Drive here. I am going down into the Park. I sometimes go there to walk."

His pulse beat quickly under the thought that she might permit him to accompany her, and yet he was afraid to propose it, feeling instinctively that if he mentioned it she would refuse. However, she allowed him to take her arm and help her across the Drive, and that vaguely encouraged him to remain at her side a moment longer. Near by there was a stone stairway leading down into the Park, and she permitted him to descend it with her.

"You can't imagine how glad I am to see you, Lydia," he faltered. "Since I saw you in Washington I have thought of little else than that meeting. I deserve all you said and more, but I am sure you would pity me if you knew me as I now am and all that I have suffered."

They had reached a shaded walk, and she paused and looked at him steadily and curiously. He felt her calm eyes sweeping his lined face, clothes, and gray hair.

"I can see that you have suffered," she said, with a little sigh. "I was sorry afterward that I spoke so harshly to you that day; but I was frightened—oh, I was frightened! I cannot now make you understand my position without explaining certain things which I never shall explain. One thing, however, is sure—our lives must lie apart—there is no other way—none under the sun."

"God knows I cannot ask you to make a confidant of me after my cowardly conduct," he faltered; "but you are noble-hearted, Lydia, and you will forgive. You may not believe it, but I'd give my life to atone for the wrong I have done you."

Again she was eying him studiously. "I think you

THE INNER LAW

look altered," she observed, "and I am sorry for you. Still, if I could tell you all, you would know that—that we must never be seen together."

"Oh, then you are—are bound to *some one else*?" he gulped.

"No, no, not in the way you think," she thrust in quickly. "I am giving my whole life to my work."

"I know—I know, and it is a noble calling," he said, off his guard.

"What do you know of my work?" she asked, suspiciously. "I have not yet told you what I do. How *could* you know?"

He hesitated, his eyes averted from her now quite anxious stare, the blood rushing to his face. "Perhaps I haven't quite the right to—to say how I discovered it," he said; "but it was purely accidental."

A knowing look came into her eyes. "Oh, I think I know now! I thought I was unrecognized that day by your friend Farnham, but he knew me, after all. He was the only old acquaintance that I had run across for years and years. I tried to escape his notice, but I see now that he knew me."

"Yes, he knew you. He spoke of that meeting to me early this summer, but he could not recall the name you bore."

"Well, I am glad that he could not, for I don't want you to know it, but I assure you that I am tired of hiding from it all."

"But why do you?" he faltered.

"Why do I, indeed?" she cried. "Oh, that you, of all persons, could ask such a question! Well, I am not going to explain. I have reasons for my silence, and they are sufficient—quite sufficient."

There was a bench at the side of the walk, over the back of which hung a mass of green shrubbery, and she sat down to rest. He hesitated, fearing that the liberty

THE INNER LAW

might offend her, but finally seated himself on the end of the bench.

"Lydia," he resumed, appealingly, "I was a thoughtless, brainless boy when I deserted you so heartlessly. Since then sorrow, trouble, and a dissatisfied mind have crushed all pride out of me. I am humiliated as few men have ever been humiliated, and it is by the very hand of God. I myself have reached a point in life at which I would forgive the greatest personal wrong that could possibly be done me. You are kind and good. I see it in your sweet face, hear it in your voice. I presume I am the only person in the world whom you could never forgive?"

"I don't know—oh, I don't know!" she returned, thoughtfully. Then suddenly she drew herself erect, tossed her head, and flared out, angrily: "*You* talk of suffering—*you, you!* Pardon me, but I can't see what *you've* ever had to suffer about," her pretty lip curling. "From newspaper notices, mostly of a high social nature, which I happened to see from time to time, I learned that you were leading a gay and reckless life in Europe, often with titled men and women, always with the rich and the influential. Do you think any proud girl would be apt to forgive a man under such circumstances? And I was as proud as the proudest! I discovered that, when my heart-broken mother took me to New Orleans and showed me that I must act a lie among total strangers all the rest of my life for the sake of our helpless child that—" Lydia suddenly checked herself, her hand quickly raised to her mouth. She turned pale, her face hardened, and her lips twitched and quivered. She looked away, seeming conscious that she had said more than she intended.

"Our child—our child?" he gasped in surprise. "Was there a child? *Is* there a child, Lydia?"

She seemed frightened by his question. She was doggedly silent, almost sullenly so till he had repeated his query; then she blurted out:

THE INNER LAW

"No, no; I don't know what I was saying. At times my mind gets wrong and I say things with no meaning at all."

"But you *said* it—you *said* it!" He leaned forward, his face ashen and quivering. "Oh, Lydia, you *said* it! You may have a reason for wanting to deceive me about this, but for God's sake don't do it. If there is a child, a son or a daughter, I want to know it—I ought to know it. Surely, surely you would not keep such a vital thing as that from *me*?"

She lowered her head in dumb defiance. He saw only her exquisite profile. Her lips were tightly pressed together. The lids of her eyes seemed to contract under fear and indecision. He saw her gloved fingers clenched tightly over the handle of her closed sunshade, upon which she leaned almost limply.

"Oh, Lydia, you must tell me the truth!" he pleaded. "If there is a child you have no right, before God, to hide it from me."

She still refused to look at him. "Well, I *did* say it—I *did* say it," she confessed, frowningly, and in growing desperation. "There *was* a child, but he died—he died, I tell you, and you can never see him. You deserted him as you deserted me. He is dead—yes, dead, dead!"

"Dead? Oh, Lydia, Lydia, what are you saying? How long did he live?"

She turned upon him almost as an angry tigress. "Why do *you* want to know so much? Why do *you* ask? It—it is *my* matter, not *yours*. God knows *you* have no right to be told *anything* concerning me and mine. I know things which you can never know—which you should never know—and that must suffice. I was his sole guardian, an ignorant mountain girl, the daughter of a servant, the mother of a budding genius."

He groaned aloud. "Dead! Dead!" he cried. "A son of mine and yours, and I am not even to know how he looked or what he was like?"

THE INNER LAW

She seemed to be softened by the wilted look of despair which lay upon him, the sickening pallor of his face; she seemed even to pity him.

"I would like to tell you more, but I can't—I simply can't," she said, more gently now. "Yes, you have a right to know what he was like. He looked something like you did when I first met you. I mean—I mean," she nervously corrected, "that, as child, he was slender and had some of your features. He was imaginative, wonderfully bright, and had a most lovable disposition. Strangers often stopped and admired him on the streets and gave him presents. He was always saying unexpected things—wise things. I studied hard that I might teach him. He was very affectionate, and—and I adore—adored him."

"And he died without my ever seeing him," Crofton moaned. "I have been heavily punished already, Lydia; but this punishment will last the remainder of my wretched life. I shall never cease to remember that I had a son and lost him through my own cowardice and despicable weakness."

"Do you mean"—she bent toward him eagerly and yet dubiously—"that if he were alive you would actually care for him?"

"I would worship him—die for him," Crofton answered, fervently. "I'd die for him a thousand times."

"Ah, I see—I see," her beautiful brows drawn thoughtfully together, "but you are not looking deeply enough. It would take the experience I have had to be able to do so. What if knowing you to be his father, in the sense that you were his father, would have made his whole life miserable? You see, he never suspected the disgraceful blight upon him. It would have killed him. He was almost abnormally proud, sensitive, and aspiring. No, he could not have stood it, and it would have been a crime to put the consequences of our conduct upon him."

THE INNER LAW

They were both silent for several minutes, their glance on some sail-boats on the river. Presently Crofton spoke again:

"You have not told me how old he was when he died, Lydia?"

"Haven't I?" her lashes flickering as they sank over her wonderful eyes. "He was young—he was young; that is enough to say."

"And since then you have been all alone?" he said, gently.

"Yes, all alone; but I had my work, and it absorbed me. Now, I must go. I have stayed out as long as I can. I have a patient near here." She stood up erectly, opened her sunshade, and turned toward the street. He was by her side at once, but she gave him a cold, firm glance. "I don't want to pain you again," she said; "but I'd rather you would let me go to the street alone. I can't fully explain, but I have acquaintances in this neighborhood whom I have known for years, and I might meet them. Women in my profession have to be careful, and I more than any of the others. I could not lie to them about you, as I'd have to do. I could not introduce you. My life has been a lie, but not a direct one."

"I understand," he said, dejectedly; "but am I not to see you again—*ever again?*"

"But why, why do you *want* to see me?" she asked, her face filling with a faint, pink glow which reminded him of her girlhood.

"Because you are all I have to care for in the world," he answered, fervently. "I know now that I loved you when I left you, and that I have loved you ever since. A quarter of a century of blind stupidity has shown me your depth of soul and character. I know what you have suffered. I must see you again—I must—I must! Oh, Lydia, I must—I must!"

The pink glow was still on her exquisite face; it seemed

THE INNER LAW

to sweep into her eyes and fill them with a melting light of pity.

"I walk here on Saturday mornings," she said, finally. "It is wrong for me to meet you—for me to take the *risk* of meeting you, but I will once more, anyway. I will be here next Saturday morning at about the time I came to-day. Now, good-by. Don't be unhappy—don't!"

When she had left him he walked down to the river's edge. His very body seemed imponderable. It was as if he were a moving entity without form or substance. "I shall see her again! I shall see her again!" he kept saying to himself. "Lydia, Lydia, the mother of my dead child—the sweetest, most suffering, most wronged of all women. God will show me a way to win her forgiveness. He will, He will!"

CHAPTER IX

THE next afternoon Crofton went to the encampment. Jimmy was on the landing, throwing out and drawing in his crab-nets.

"Socrates has just left here," he said. "He is half off his nut to see you. He went back to the camp. He is afraid you won't come to-day."

"Anything particular?" Crofton asked.

"You'll have to ask him," Jimmy smiled, mysteriously. "It is his business. He says I can't hold my tongue, nohow."

When he had gotten half-way to the tent Crofton saw Socrates approaching. On seeing him, the boy threw his cap in the air, shouted with glee, and danced merrily on the grass by the path, kicking high and comically curving his arms over his head.

"What is all this about?" Crofton asked, feeling like a boy at sport with a boy. The hope roused by his last meeting with Lydia had taken the weight of years from his shoulders. He felt like dancing and shouting himself. The whole world seemed transcendently bright, the youth some sort of human assurance of the infinite friendliness and forgiveness of the universe to all created beings.

"We were afraid you'd happen not to come to-day, of all days." Socrates was now at his side, and had put his arm familiarly about his shoulders. "If you had failed we'd have been the most disappointed bunch on the shore. We are getting ready for the spread in your honor. We are to have it at six this evening."

THE INNER LAW

"Ah! is that so?" Crofton exclaimed, delighted.

"Yes. We have been at work all morning, ten or twelve of us, gathering logs and driftwood for a big bonfire. We have bought a whole pig, and are now roasting it over a bed of living coals. Hurry up, I want you to see what we are doing. The women all along the line have lent us dishes and knives, forks, and spoons, and we have built a long table out of planks and boards. It is to be a barbecue out and out."

"I don't deserve it, Socrates," said Crofton, resisting an impulse to embrace the boy. "I am almost a stranger to you all."

"Humph! Well, they don't feel that way," Socrates returned. "They have never wanted to do this sort of thing for anybody else. And I haven't myself. We want to do it—that's all. Say, I think they are getting on to you."

Crofton started. "What do you mean?" he asked, almost fearfully.

"Why," Socrates laughed, "they've been owning up to one another. They know you can't afford it, but you have lent money—or given it, rather—to nearly every man here who is out of work. Two of them said last night that in their cases you had not waited to be asked. One said you actually apologized for doing it, that you made several 'round-about stabs at it,' as he put it, before you made the offer. Say, you may think what you will of the joys of existence, but the joy of helping men who are down and out is actually the greatest joy in life. How can a person doubt the love of God when a human being can love another as you do, and be kind to him? God made mere human machines who can be kind, and yet skeptics say God Himself is not kind."

The path was now sloping down to the encampment on the beach. Socrates gave a keen whistle, which was

THE INNER LAW

answered by a hallo from below. At this moment Jimmy hurriedly passed them, carrying a crab-net in either hand.

"Have you told him?" Crofton heard him ask Socrates under his panting breath.

"Yes, he knows, you blooming chump," Socrates laughed.

"Yes, I know, Jimmy," Crofton added. "It is the greatest honor ever paid me."

"Oh, come off!" Jimmy sniffed. "We are nothing but a bunch o' hoboos. Well, we'll have some fun. That pile of logs will set the river on fire. We had a good one last year, but it wasn't in it wid dis one."

That afternoon Crofton worked with the others, drawing logs, beams, boxes, kegs, barrels, and hogsheads from the incoming tide, and heaping them upon the vast pile of rubbish on the shore. The sweat rolled in drops from his body; his skin was pink and blended with tan; his muscles had grown and toughened; he felt stronger than he ever had felt before. It was a novel experience; he was playing like a child with grown men who had lapsed into childhood. He had been born into a veritable new life in which there was no hint of his old cares.

While he was helping in this work the palatial yacht of a well-known young millionaire passed down the river. It was snowy white, and as graceful and swift as a bird. A small party sat under awnings on deck. Crofton paused in his work, watching the craft with the others, and listening to their wise and droll comments.

"Boys, stand out o' me way!" Jimmy cried, jerking a soiled red handkerchief from his pocket and stepping forward on the sand. "I told John P. last night at the club that I would be here to-day. He offered to send a launch ashore for me and take me for a ride wid him and his dames (see 'im waving his cap?), but I told him I wanted to be here to-day. Hey, hey! old boy Johnny, go

THE INNER LAW

ahead!" vigorously waving the handkerchief. "I can't be wid you dis morning. I'm doin' some slummin' work; but good luck to you, and me regards to de dames."

"Yes, he wants you, you slob," a dry wit, a shad-fisherman from up the river, called out; "he wants you to peel potatoes or mop the deck."

"Dry up! I've got *your* number, you rummy." Jimmy smiled good-naturedly, stuffing his handkerchief into his hip pocket. "I know you, all right."

The sun went down in a blaze of red and gold which rested like a crown on the Palisades. The shadows of the mighty cliff-peaks crept across the river and the far-off buildings of the city were draped in the thickening folds of twilight. The heap of logs was lighted. Slowly it burned at first, and then the flames crept in and out and higher and higher. They danced around it, men, women, and children—shouting, laughing, singing, jesting. When the blaze was at its height dinner was announced. Jimmy and another man grasped Crofton by the arms and forced him to take the only seat at the table, an inverted sugar-barrel. Jimmy invited himself to make a speech, and would have succeeded in doing so but for the yells and groans of the others. There were no formalities. Crofton's brain fairly swam in a flood of content. Everybody was hungry and everybody was joking and yet courteous to his fellow.

The bonfire began to lose its whiter light, and by the time the feast was over it had become a vast heap of livid coals and embers. The lights in the boats on the river were like creeping stars in a sky lowered to the feet of the beholders. Now and then from some boat came music, singing, the twanging of stringed instruments, merry laughter. The joy on the water seemed an overflow of the joy on the shore.

When most of the women and children had gone to their tents some of the men, who lived too far away to

THE INNER LAW

return that night, threw themselves on the ground near the fire and went to sleep. Socrates approached Crofton, who was thinking of going back to the city.

"You mustn't go," he said. "I have an extra cot in my tent for you. It would be hard for you to catch a boat at this hour, and I know you are tired like all the rest of us."

Crofton gratefully accepted the invitation, and he and the boy went to the tent and retired. They were about to extinguish the little oil-lamp when Crofton thought he detected an unexpressed desire of some vague sort in his companion's shadowy face.

"What is on your mind, Socrates?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing," but the word was accompanied by a sigh, and the boy turned the wick of the lamp low and asked: "Are you ready? Shall I put it out?"

"Yes; but you haven't answered my question yet," Crofton replied. "I have caught you looking at me anxiously several times to-day."

"Oh, is that so?" He blew out the light, and they were in darkness. Crofton heard the boy's cot creak as he stretched his slender limbs out on it.

"Yes, your mind was on something besides all that fun and nonsense. There were times when you did not join in with the others. Once I saw you sitting alone with a worried frown on your face. You are too young for that."

"Well, I'll own up," Socrates said, unsteadily. "Say, you will think I am a hopeless novice and troublesome, but you remember you promised to—to send that poem of mine to a magazine?"

"Yes. Didn't I tell you I'd sent it? I supposed you would take it for granted, after what I said. I sent it off at once."

"Did you really, *really*?"

"Yes, of course, and, moreover, I wrote a strong letter of commendation with it."

THE INNER LAW

"And—and—" Socrates' voice faltered and died away. For a moment neither of them spoke, but Crofton heard the boy sigh again, turn over suddenly, and utter an exclamation of impatience. "What's the use?" he cried. "I might as well own up. The thing has worried me more than anything for years."

"Worried you? I don't understand."

"Well, it has. I'm made that way, and I can't help it. You saw something in the blame poem because you want to please me, and you think it will suit a magazine, but it won't. It will come back to you, and then you will have the contempt for me that I deserve for being so conceited. A success like that is not for me. I'd rather have it than all the money in the world, but it is not for me—not for me, and it is hard to think how thoroughly you will despise me when you realize the truth. I ought to have stopped you—I ought—I ought!"

Crofton was deeply moved. He sat up and leaned toward the silent shape against the tent cloth. "Listen to me," he said, almost huskily. "I am not overrating your work because I know and like you personally. That poem is wonderful. The lines ring in my ears constantly; your original thought and richness of expression thrill me through and through. There are times when I look upon you as a prophet—a reincarnation of one of the old ones. I am as sure of the success of that poem, and others you have written, as I am that you lie there torturing yourself with self-criticism."

"Oh, it can't be—it can't!" the boy fairly sobbed. "I dare not let myself hope it. The disappointment would kill me. I want it for your sake. I want it for my mother's sake. I don't think she has ever hoped that I could do such a thing well enough for publication. I want it for the sake of the work itself, too; but, oh, it will come back—it will come back! Then you will see that you were mistaken, that you let your kind heart run away

THE INNER LAW

with your judgment. Poof! I'm only a mechanic. My place is at a bench on a carpet of sawdust and shavings. God made me nameless. Why should I be allowed to gain a name or a respectable place in a world which has never been mine?"

"For the very reason that you have suffered so bravely, so patiently," Crofton was fairly pleading. "And it would please your mother, you say?"

"Please her? She'd be the happiest woman in the world. She thinks I have a good mind, but she doesn't dream that I ever really hoped for success as a writer, and I don't—I don't! Remember that—remember that, when the manuscript comes back. Don't bring it to me; destroy it—don't let me see it again. Simply remain silent and I'll understand—I'll understand!"

"The editor will communicate with you, in my care," Crofton said. "I asked him to do that, because I thought he would like to write to you personally. Don't be despondent, my boy. The world is brighter than it looks. I know, for I have been through the depths and seem to be coming out into light."

They were silent for several minutes. Presently Socrates spoke again of his mother. "Yes, it would delight her! She wants me to quit my job, anyway. She is pleased with California. She has decided to buy a small cottage out there so that she and I can live together. She hopes that I can get employment, and she wants to stop traveling about so much. Oh, if only I could earn money by writing! What joy could be like that for her and for me?"

"California!" Crofton lay still. California would be his new friend's home in the future, and he would remain alone in New York or be forced to resume his wanderings, with nothing for their object, nothing for their goal. He now realized for the first time and fully how fond he was of the lad by his side, and a pang of pain passed

THE INNER LAW

through him at the thought of parting from him for ever.

"You will be happy there with a home of your own," he heard himself saying. "It is a beautiful country, and the climate is fine. They appreciate art and literature out there, and will encourage you."

"If only it could be!" the boy sighed. "But it can't—it can't! Fate has hit me below the belt all my life, even when I was younger and weaker. It won't fight fair in this, either. It is a dream—a dream—and I'll have to remain as I am."

An hour passed before the tired boy slept, but even then the man remained wakeful, for he was unusually distressed, and it was long past midnight before he, too, fell asleep.

CHAPTER X

ON the Saturday morning of his appointment to meet Lydia in Riverside Park, Crofton received a letter from Farnham, and he read it as he walked away from the house. The first part of the letter pertained to business matters, but it was the closing lines which interested the recipient most.

"Don't think I've been meddling clumsily," Farnham wrote, "for I am sure I have accomplished results in that family matter of yours. In fact, I think I worked your sister as fine as I ever did a man in a keen trade, and that is saying a lot. The more I thought of the injustice of her rotten scheme, the madder it made me. You see, I've got a personal interest in it, too, for her ridiculous suit would naturally bring our enterprises to the front, and some jokes would be made at our expense which would not exactly help increase dividends. So I simply decided to get to work on the matter and wipe it out.

"I called on her in her shady, cavelike home, ostensibly to let her know I had seen her dear brother in New York and found him well; then I gave her plenty of line and watched her play. She took my bait and swam straight toward me, every fin and scale showing. She appealed to my honor as a Southern gentleman of the old school (I'm afraid I was expelled long ago), and said it was the talk of all Atlanta that you were losing your mind, throwing your money away recklessly on anybody who would take it, and insisted on my standing by her and furnishing ample evidence to support her claim. I listened atten-

THE INNER LAW

tively and then proposed that she and I go see her lawyer and talk it over. She fell into it at once. You've seen that despicable shark, Wade Darlington. He is by far the most contemptible scoundrel unhung. He would have been behind the bars long ago but for his knowledge of how to evade the law. He has defended so many cut-throats and thieves that he is an embodiment in bloodless flesh of both classes. When he saw me enter his office with your sister he at once took it for granted that I was her witness, and he fell all over me. My very name melted in his mouth. I listened to their talk and their plans for an hour, pretending all along to see nothing wrong in them. Finally, your sister left me and him together. I had myself been laying a little plan more or less justifiable according to the state of one's morals and enforced associates, and when I had him to myself I remarked to him—as a starter—that had I only known that there really was such a legal brain in the South as his our company certainly would not have allowed another firm of lawyers to represent us in our legal matters. Thereupon I hinted—you may not know, on your highly spiritual plane, how I can hint at purely mundane things which have no possibility of existing, but I hinted that there was really no actual reason why we should not a little later turn our legal matters over to him. I did not commit myself—I seldom do, you know—I simply hinted at what might happen, seeing that I had by pure accident, as it were, discovered a real legal genius. He bit my bait, too—it was a good day for suckers. He abused our lawyers as the most brainless, inefficient firm that ever disgraced the bar of America, and asked me tremblingly, as he spoke of his big earnings, how much his services would be worth to us. I told him I'd have to consult our directors, and rose as if to go. At the door I turned back, as if on second thought. There is *one* difficulty in your getting the appointment right off, anyway,

THE INNER LAW

I remarked, casually, though I knew I was hurling a bomb. 'What is it?' he asked, uneasily, almost pale with sudden anxiety.

"'Why,' I answered, 'as matters now stand, I'll have to get Crofton's sanction as a director and main stockholder, and I'm just a little bit afraid when he learns of your management of his sister's case he might oppose any effort of mine to employ you.'

"He actually turned pale. 'I see, I see,' he frowned. 'Why didn't I think of that?' He made me stay longer. He walked back and forth as restlessly as a lion in a cage. Suddenly he turned to me.

"'This matter of Miss Crofton's is merely a chance, anyway, don't you think?' he inquired, anxiously.

"'Oh, well,' I said, 'I presume you get a fair retaining fee, anyway, and that is *something* to the good?'

"'She won't pay any,' he growled; 'she never does. If I can't put the thing through I won't get a red cent. What do you think of my chances?'

"I shook my head slowly—I was afraid my hook would slip out of his gills. 'To be frank,' I answered, finally, 'if I am put on oath as a chief witness, I could not swear that I think Crofton is insane, or anywhere near it. It would be a strange jury of human beings that would take a man's property from him for being mildly charitable, and turn it over to one who isn't. I am afraid there are two kinds of insanity—liberality and stinginess—and there are some people who say that your client is not wholly rational.'

"'I see, I see.' He squeezed his bearded chin nervously, and his little eyes blinked rapidly. 'What do you think I'd better do?' he inquired. 'You and I may be closely connected in future, and I want your advice. You see, I am between two fires.'

"I still hung back, for I was afraid the scamp might have intuition. I resented his cocksureness, too, in re-

THE INNER LAW

gard to the imaginary change of our legal advisers, and felt like kicking him for their sake as well as yours. He warmly insisted on hearing from me, however, and my delay in giving an opinion made it all the more convincing. Presently I said:

“I can only tell you how I would act if I were in your place. I wouldn’t touch as flimsy a case as that with a ten-foot pole. You can’t win it, and your failure would only make you the laughing-stock of the entire South, and turn Crofton against you.”

“I think you are right,” my floundering fish said. ‘I’ll see her to-day and advise her to drop it.’

“Well,” I said, indifferently, ‘I think that is best.’

“To make a long story short, your sweet sister came to me the next day and told me she had decided not to proceed against you, that she loved you too much, and a lot more. She begged me not to tell you what she had been about (and I sha’n’t—I swear I sha’n’t). As she was leaving she asked me if I thought you’d ever marry, and I told her I did not think it was likely—that sane men seldom ever did, and that I was sure you still had your wits about you.”

CHAPTER XI

PLEASED and vaguely soothed over the contents of the letter, Crofton strode blithely along Riverside Drive toward the entrance to the Park. It was a rarely beautiful morning. The walk was shaded by the tall apartment-houses on the eastern side of the wide thoroughfare and the fine trees in its center. The loungers reading newspapers on the green benches, the nurse-maids in white aprons and beribboned caps with the pretty, well-groomed children, reminded him of the boulevards of Paris.

He descended into the Park and at once sought the seat he had occupied with Lydia. He was full of nervous excitement and anxiety. What if she should not come, after all? What if she should have changed her mind and gone away from the city on some sudden call to duty? The day was warm, and yet he was cold all over and trembled. How could he bear such a disappointment, for he had built much on her reluctant consent to meet him? She had been in his thoughts every hour since they had parted. She must pity him—she must listen to him. He couldn't give her up. The hope of her was filling his lonely life like an infinite promise of ultimate redemption. She must be his—she must, she must!

The minutes dragged by; an hour was gone and still she had not come. His hopes were at the lowest ebb. He paced restlessly back and forth along the concrete walk, now and then returning to ascend the stone steps and look down and up the Drive. Presently he saw her alighting from a 'bus at the point where she and he had

THE INNER LAW

descended before, and his blood pounded madly in his veins. Remembering what she had said about not wanting to be seen with him on the street, he quickly retreated to the bench where they had sat before, and stood waiting for her. Oh, how slow she was—how very slow! In fact, she was so long in making her appearance at the head of the steps which he was hungrily watching that he was filled with fresh apprehension. What could be the matter? He was about to go back to the street when he descried her at the head of the stairs, stepping daintily down. She smiled apologetically when she had reached him.

"You thought I was not coming," she began, tentatively, as she half-hesitatingly gave him her gloved hand. "I was detained at home for fully an hour. I had to talk with a physician about an important case of a poor woman who is unable to pay him or me. I have agreed to take it and begin this afternoon. Then right up there, as I left the 'bus, I met a doctor I know. I had to stop for a moment. I saw you standing at the entrance, and was glad you came back here."

"I have been crazy to see you, Lydia," he began. "I have thought of nothing but you since last Saturday. You have given me new life; you must not take it from me."

He saw her beautiful brows contract, and a troubled look rise in the depths of her thoughtful eyes. "Oh, if only it lay with me—wholly with me!" she said, almost as if to herself. "But it doesn't, Carter"—the old name—pronounced as of old in the sweet Southern accent—slipped from her impulsive lips. "See, I have always called you that in my memory, because I once did, you know. Oh, I am helpless, Carter, absolutely helpless!"

"How? What do you mean? Can't you explain?" he implored her.

She slowly shook her head as she sat down. "Explain?"

THE INNER LAW

That is it; I can't even explain. You will have to take my word for it, that is all."

"Take your word for it?" He checked a groan. "I can't, Lydia, if it means that we are to remain parted. I can stand anything but that now. I now know that in the eyes of God you are my *wife*, and weak as I have been, neglectful as I've been, cruel as I've been, still—oh, Lydia, you are the mother of our poor dead son, and I, who have never known what it was to be a father, and who yearns for fatherhood as no man I have ever known yearns—"

"Don't—don't speak of *him*!" she exclaimed, her lips twitching. "We mustn't *speak of him*—we mustn't!"

"But why?" he groaned, as he sat down closer to her than he had dared on their former meeting. "Lydia, in my mind I have asked you a thousand questions about him since I learned of his birth and death. Oh, Lydia, you *saw* him—you *knew* him—you actually heard his voice, while I, who deserted him like a craven coward—"

"Don't! Don't!" she pleaded. "I shall go if you don't stop."

"Then I'll stop," he yielded. "You know best."

"Yes, I certainly know best, about him, at least," she agreed. He saw tears in her eyes; the flood of them seemed to back up beneath her delicate pink-and-olive skin, adding inexplicable emotional beauty to her rare face. "It was of something else I hoped to speak to you to-day. We have naturally different points of view, perhaps. Carter, from words you have dropped I fancy you are different in character from what you were away back there in the mountains. I almost think—I think sometimes that you have become even religious."

"I may be," he admitted. "I am just beginning to try to live as I think a man ought to live to put himself into harmony with God's highest law."

She led him on adroitly, a vast interest and suspense

THE INNER LAW

in her manner, to speak of his gradual awakening to spiritual verities. He left nothing out. He bared his soul to her as he had scarcely even bared it to himself. He went back to his terrible struggle between two impulses in New Orleans, his uncle's God-lent advice on one hand and Farnham's materialistic views on the other. In a cowed whisper, and avoiding the steady stare of her eyes, which were full of shimmering tears of sympathy, he told of his final decision. Next he spoke of his reckless life in Europe in that long, misguided effort to drown the past in the pursuit of vanity, frivolity, and a collapsing career in letters. He spoke of his effort to marry a woman he did not love, merely that he might have companionship and some sort of home. He described his return to America, his brother's terrible death and its profound effect upon him. He mentioned his search for the meaning of life through idealistic philosophy, and lastly how he had found a certain sense of peace, or a promise of peace, in self-renunciation and association with the humblest of humanity and his effort to help them.

When he had finished she suddenly put out her hand in an unconscious impulse, and laid it on his arm almost with a touch of tenderness. "And to think that this can be *you*, actually *you*!" she said, tremulously. "Oh, I have prayed that this might come to you, the father of my sweet boy, for his sake as well as yours. It is the only key to life, Carter, and you are finding it through trouble and pain just as I found it in the darkest shadows that ever encompassed a woman. Oh, Carter, my whole life has been one of lonely spiritual hunger to meet some one who understands these great truths, and I have found that person in you—*you* of all human beings under the sun!"

"You understand, too, I see," he said, gently, tenderly. "There is a law, and man can grasp it, can't he, Lydia?"

"Yes, yes, without doubt," she returned. "I wonder

THE INNER LAW

if I am not wrong in deploring anything that has taken place—*anything?*”

“I don’t quite follow you,” he ventured, feeling ecstatically as if they had left their bodies and were floating hand in hand somewhere, somehow, in a new and unknown element from which all material sordidness was dropping like rain from a cloud.

“Why, Carter, since our troubles, our bitter experiences have brought us to this wonderful exaltation and vision of mystic truth, how can we reproach God for leading us through them? Faith is so beautiful—faith to God first, and next to man as His miniature. See, you have faith in *me*. You have not seen me for all these years. My life has been a closed book to you. When you left me I was a poor, ragged, ignorant girl. I am now in a profession that has thrown me into contact with all sorts of men and temptations, yet here you are full of boundless faith and trust in me. You doubted that woman in Geneva whom you thought of marrying. You do not doubt me because God has torn the scales from your eyes and shown you my true self. I trust you, too. I see your very pleading soul with the eyes of mine, and I am going to confess something that many a proud woman would hide for ever, and that is, Carter, that, in spite of all that has happened, I have loved you every day, every hour, every minute, since I first met you with that dusting-rag in my hands in your uncle’s library. I have always known that it was your outer self that was cruel, blind, and thoughtless, and so, as I nursed that tiny counterpart of yourself on my breast I kept you in my heart and prayed for you day and night.”

Crofton was so full of blended sympathy and joy that he could not speak. There was no one in sight, and he reached out and took her hand. She allowed him to hold it for a moment, and then he felt her gently, firmly, withdrawing it. To his surprise, he heard her sigh. She

THE INNER LAW

stroked her quivering lips with the hand he had released, and her face clouded over.

"Oh, Lydia, Lydia, you have made me very happy!" he faltered. "You are to be my wife at last. We'll be the happiest pair God ever created. We've been expelled, but we are going back into the Garden of Eden, my own, my own, my darling!"

"Oh, I see—I see what you—you hope for." She lowered her head and uttered a little gasp which was like a welling sob.

"What is the matter?" he pleaded in growing consternation.

She was silent. She rose, turned her back upon him, and he thought that the action was to hide her face, for it was filling with the gray shadows of inner and sensitive pain. He stood beside her, wondering what could be in her thoughts, far-reaching, even superstitious fears flooding over him. Still silent, she led him down the walk closer to the water's edge. On the greensward children were playing with tennis-balls and rackets, and with merry shouts and laughter rolling on the thick grass like playful puppies.

"You alarm me, Lydia," he ventured, tentatively. "You show that you are not happy."

"Happy? How can I be that?" She suddenly turned her wistful eyes upon him. She laid her hand on his arm. "Listen to me, Carter, oh, listen to me, dear!" she said, softly. "We have both been blessed by an almost supernatural knowledge of God and His holy demands on His children. Have you ever thought that the strangest, the very strangest thing that Jesus ever said was that we must love God more than wife, husband, or child, and if not we cannot be true followers of Him?"

"Yes, it is strange, almost incomprehensible," Crofton returned, wondering what her drift could be.

"It may be the truest thing ever spoken by God to

THE INNER LAW

man," she went on, "a message not meant for the uninitiated, but for such as you and me. Carter, Carter, dear, *God may not intend us for each other*, here on this plane of life, at least."

"Oh, don't say that—don't, don't!" he pleaded, passionately, desperately.

"I can't help it, for I know—know—know a thing that you don't know, and which you must *never* know. I can't serve God and Mammon and you are my Mammon!"

"Puff!" he exclaimed in relief. "I'll throw it all away, if money is what you mean. I don't want it. It has been a curse to me every day of my life, and if I lose you through it it will be worse than a curse, it will be my eternal damnation."

"I don't mean that you are my Mammon in *that* sense." She was quick to correct the impression he had sprung to receive. "I mean—I mean—oh, if I dared to tell you *everything* you would see what I mean, but as much as I trust you in all *other* things I cannot quite trust you in this. I can't—I can't! Your very nobleness and tenderness of heart make it impossible."

"You bewilder me, you mystify me!" he cried. "You intimate that I am to lose you, and I can't lose you now, Lydia. I can't—I simply can't!"

"Not if God has decreed it—decreed it as our supreme test of faith and total renunciation of ourselves?" she asked, a soft glow of supernal light filling her face and eyes, its accompanying music vibrating in her tense voice.

"It couldn't be so," he groaned, "not now—not after all we have suffered."

"Is it not a spiritual fact," she asked, with a little conclusive sigh, "has it not been shown in religious history, that the nearer a bowed and broken seeker gets to God the greater the sacrifices which are demanded? If you knew all I know you'd see, as I see, that we cannot do our duty to the supreme law—we cannot fully atone for

THE INNER LAW

our transgression — without giving up each other. We want each other now more than we want God, and we must rise above it or we are lost."

He was actually stunned by her words and the calm force of her utterance. "You are keeping back something from me," he finally said. "My God, my God, Lydia, are you married?"

"Oh no, no!" she shook her head. "It isn't that—oh no, no!"

"And you won't explain?" he gasped, his face white, his lips limp and sagging piteously.

"I can't," she said, her own lips drawn tight from pain. "I have no right to do so. And if you knew all you'd see you really have no right to ask."

He pleaded no longer. They had found another bench and seated themselves upon it. An hour of bleeding silence passed. The bell of a church across the river a mile or more distant rang slowly, the waves of sound floating mellowly on the sunlit waves of water.

"And yet he *ought* to know; he has a *right* to know," he heard her saying, almost as if in prayer. "He would not betray such a sacred trust; he is too noble."

"I would betray nothing." He leaned toward her, his very drooping attitude a prayer to her. "I would give my life a dozen times rather than disobey you in the slightest wish."

"Then I'll trust you—I'll tell you," she said, impulsively. "Carter, our union—even a continued friendship—is absolutely impossible. You will understand when I say that our son is not dead. For his sake I lied to you. From his very babyhood—to save him from pain and humiliation before the world—I taught him that his father was dead. He is as proud as you once were, and as ambitious and sensitive."

"Not dead?" Crofton cried. "*Our son* alive?"

She nodded her head slowly, her eyes fixed on the

THE INNER LAW

toe of her shoe showing beneath her skirt. "No, he is not dead; now you comprehend," she added, almost in a ghastly whisper. "It would take me years to make you thoroughly understand the situation, and I shall not undertake it. You must simply abide by my judgment. If there were any other way I would take it, but there is not."

"Not dead—not dead! How strange it seems!" Crofton said. "My son and yours! Oh, I've always wanted a son, Lydia, even in my vilest days abroad, and somehow in my fancy I've always pictured you as his mother, and now that we have one in reality he is lost to me. I am not even to see him—is that it, darling? My God, is that it?"

"Yes, that seems best to me, Carter. Ever since I have witnessed the change for good in you I've been afraid that your very better self would be his undoing and mine. You'd love him—you couldn't help it—everybody loves him. You'd betray our secret. He is—he is so, so— But I can't tell you about him."

"You can't?" he panted. "You can't even tell me what he is like?"

"No, for as it is now, he is nothing to you. He is a mere mind-picture of your own which holds nothing that would actually tie you to him. He died to you, Carter, even before he was born to me. Don't seek to know him, dear, but leave him to me. I love you almost as much as I love him, but my first duty is to him. He thinks I am his legal mother, worthy of the world's respect. I could not bear to have him know the truth. You see, dear, it would be placing our own just punishment upon his young, innocent shoulders. It would blight his whole life, and we would be doing it to gratify ourselves."

"I see, I see," Crofton groaned. "I am lost, Lydia. I thought I was reaching the earthly gate, at least, of the Kingdom of God. I was hoping that all the dark-

THE INNER LAW

ness of my past, by some wonderful spiritual process, was turning to light. I thought I was becoming truly unselfish, but now I see that I want you and my son more than I want God."

"Don't say that," she said, with a rising sob, "and yet I must not judge you. I am sorry for you, for I have him and you have not. I have deceived him, but I have him."

Crofton's emotions overpowered him. He was shaken from head to foot in a manly effort to calm the swirling tide in his breast and throat.

"Oh, if there were any other way!" she said, laying her hand on his arm and pressing it. "But, Carter dear, there really is not. I could not bear the look of sheer incredulity which would fill his sweet, trusting eyes if I told him what his parents have been. He is keenly sensitive, almost morbidly so. I think he fancies I was not quite happy with you, and for many years he has not spoken of his father, though as a little boy he was constantly doing so and telling his playmates, with a child's pride, that his father was in heaven."

"*In heaven?*" Crofton echoed, bitterly. "His father is in hell, Lydia, the deepest hell known to the lowest of the damned."

"Can you suggest any other course?" she asked him, with a piteous little sob. "I'd do anything to help you, Carter, but I see no other way."

"I see no other course," he said—"no other course, Lydia. If I should suggest anything it would rise from a selfish desire, and I have lost the right to consult my own desires."

"There is only one thing to do," she moaned, softly, "and that is to bow our heads humbly and submit. We will lose all earthly rewards, Carter, but I am sure God will give us something in their place. For one thing, He will give our son his rightful happiness. God will bless us,

THE INNER LAW

too, Carter—not here, not here, but Beyond. I feel it, I know it. We are suffering, but it is for a divine purpose. God has us on trial.”

“There is one thing you will let me do, Lydia,” he began, a faint hope flaring up in his eyes. “I have means, you know—useless means which I am giving to strangers. Won’t you let me—through you—give him a substantial part of the inheritance which is his by right?”

“By right?” she sighed; and he saw her head slowly shaking. “Carter, one’s duty to God is a marvelously delicate and intricate thing. You think that I could do that. You think that I, after all these long years of deception before my son, could go to him with a fresh lie on my tongue and face, but I couldn’t, Carter—I simply couldn’t; and why, why, oh, why? you will ask. It seems to me a thousand reasons fall from God’s spirit-sky and pack upon my feeble utterance. First, I’ve taught my boy to hate rank and distinction, money and the folly it buys. Thinking his blighted life would hold nothing but toil and poverty, I have filled him with the sublime idea of the equality of all men. I taught him to rely wholly on himself, and to give his all freely to every needy soul. Another reason is this: I have put myself and him in God’s care, believing that we shall have need for no actually good thing. If I were to lean upon your fortune—if I were to fill my hands with the coin your father accumulated and take it to my son with some adroit lie as to how I came by it, his open soul would sense the cringing shame of mine and stand back in amazement. That or—or *the other thing*.”

“What other thing?” Crofton groped, like a darker soul led somewhither by a lighter one.

“He—might—*want* it—might actually learn to *love* it!” The words fell, one by one, like bits of metal on stone. “He might fill his young soul with the subtle poison and fall, Carter, as his father fell, as many others

THE INNER LAW

have fallen. No, no, dear, he is best as he is. My long prayer is being answered. God has him in His care. You could never understand without knowing him, as I do, and you must *not* know him—that is settled once for all, is it not?”

“Yes, that is settled.” Crofton stared like a man entranced by his own doom. “And I need not ask the name he bears, even the one that you bear?”

“What is the use?” she sighed. “No good could come of it. Carter, we must not meet again, ever again. I feel it, I know it.”

“Not meet again?” he muttered; “never again?”

“Never,” she said, firmly. “This interview is destroying my courage, weakening my faith, filling me with impossible desires. I am lonely, and know you are, too; but we are not for each other. God Himself has decreed it otherwise. This is our test—our supreme test—the last obstacle to be surmounted by our tired feet on this plane of life.”

He found himself unable to formulate any logical opposition to her ultimatum. They rose and walked slowly back toward the entrance of the Park. Near the spot where they had first sat together she paused and gave him her hand. He thought that her face wore the holy, consecrated look of a nun under the soft, mystic glow of complete renunciation.

“Good-by,” she said, simply, and she turned and left him.

CHAPTER XII

THE next morning Crofton found in his mail a letter directed in his care to Joseph Allen. It was from the magazine to which he had sent his young friend's poem. Had it been his own first offering to a periodical, Crofton could not have felt more interested. Did the thick envelope, in addition to an editorial note or a printed rejection, contain the one-page manuscript or a check? It was impossible for him to decide, though he anxiously tested its weight, felt its thickness, and held it up to the light. He would not, of course, take the liberty of opening the letter, so he decided to go to the boy's camp at once. He was now possessed with misgivings for which he could hardly account. He had had strong faith in the poem, but now, under his intense desire to have his *protégé* succeed, the warmth of his former confidence was cooling. This was due, no doubt, to the fear of the great disappointment which a declination of the poem would bring to the sensitive, modest young writer.

Reaching the tent, he looked in. Socrates sat on one of the cots, a writing-pad on his knee, a pencil in his slender, sun-browned fingers.

"Caught you at it?" Crofton jested. "I am sorry to disturb your muse."

In a swift glance the youth studied his friend's face. He put down the pad quickly. He was quite grave, quite agitated.

"I knew you were coming," he faltered. "I knew exactly when you left home. I know more than that, too. I know now that you've heard from that editor."

THE INNER LAW

"Yes, I have a letter for you." Crofton drew it out and extended it.

"And you did not open it?" the youth asked. "Why didn't you?"

"Because it is addressed to you personally."

"Oh! and not because—because you suspected the rejection it contains?"

"I haven't the slightest idea what it contains," Crofton answered. "There was nothing to do but to bring it to you at once."

Socrates held the envelope in limp fingers. Pale splotches came into his cheeks and spread. He made no effort to open the communication. Presently, to the surprise of his companion, he laid it on the little stand beside his cot, rose abruptly, and left the tent. Crofton heard Jimmy call out to him, playfully, from one of the other tents, and Socrates answered in a strange, forced tone: "All right. I'll come after a while. I can't now—I'm busy."

But he wasn't busy, as Crofton noted, for he was standing still and erect by the smoldering camp-fire, his hands in the pockets of his sweater, staring out over the water. Crofton hesitated for a moment and then went and joined him.

"I think I understand you," he said, sympathetically. "You are dreading disappointment?"

The boy shrugged his shoulders. The expression of his handsome face was unreadable in its profound agitation.

"Yes, that is it," he said. "Oh, I've waited and waited for it. I've prayed. I've tried to believe that faith in it—my faith—would make it go. And when doubts would rise I would try to kill them as dangerous psychic enemies to my poetic child. But now the—the actual verdict has come. It lies there and I'm afraid of it—I'm afraid of it."

THE INNER LAW

"But you ought not to be." Crofton knew he was uttering an empty platitude. "You might as well know the outcome and be done with it."

Socrates bent down and added some sticks to the fire and mechanically fanned the underlying embers with his cap. "Oh, I know that," he said, presently. "I know it is weak and silly of me. I have a streak of superstition in me, after all. Small things don't affect me, but big ones like this take me by the throat and fairly throttle me. You may not realize it, but my life hangs on this—my very life. I would not have risked it for years if you had not advised it. Do you—oh, do you feel as—as confident now as you did when you sent the poem away?"

Crofton avoided the dumb stare of the suffering eyes. "I don't know," he said, evasively, "but that I am somewhat influenced by your present fears and anxiety. It is natural for one to be so. In my most unprejudiced moment, however, I decided that your poem was great, and I must still stick to that opinion. If this particular editor should not care for it you must not lose hope, but must try elsewhere."

"Ah, you say *'if'* now," Socrates sighed. "You did not talk that way when you sent it off. I think I am in for disappointment, and I've got to meet it. I have had too many licks in my life to win this one thing for which I'd give my soul. I want it for the joy and pride it would afford my mother. I want it for your sake, after you have tried to help me. Well, well, I must see what he says. I am gaining nothing by this."

He turned into the tent. Crofton saw him unfasten the curtains and let them drop down. There was a pause, then Crofton heard the tearing and rustling of paper, after which silence fell.

Jimmy came along with a pail of water from the spring. "Where is Soc?" he asked, carelessly.

THE INNER LAW

Crofton nodded toward the tent. "He's busy just now," he said in a significant tone. "Don't disturb him, please."

"Ah, I see—writing a pome, eh? He's a nut—bug-house for him." And Jimmy trudged on, playfully shouting to some men who were beaching a boat containing a laughing party of girls in bathing-suits.

Presently the curtains of the tent parted and Socrates came out. His face was ablaze, his eyes shone with the suppressed light of ecstasy. In his hand he held the closed letter.

"Guess," he said, a catch in his voice—"guess what it says."

"I don't have to guess," Crofton answered, his heart leaping and pounding as he spoke. "I know. I can see it in your face."

Socrates said nothing. He took a full breath, expanding his chest, and then throwing himself upon his back on the sand, he covered his face with his hands. He lay still for several minutes, and then drew himself up to a sitting posture. "I can't believe it yet," he laughed. "I'm afraid I'll wake. I'm dreaming—dreaming of the impossible! How can the man mean it? He says—he actually says he has not read anything in recent literature deeper or more beautifully expressed. He has not only taken it, but he has sent me a check for fifty dollars, and he wants more of my work; he actually asks for more at once! He says that you made such a good selection that he hopes you will look through my manuscripts and send him four or five poems for a special philosophical issue. Read, read what he says!"

Fairly transported by delight, Crofton read the letter and looked at the check.

"You deserve it," he said. "You are simply getting your just dues, that is all. This is your opportunity, and you must act on it. Such a chance seldom comes to a

THE INNER LAW

young writer. This editor will make you famous. He is a noted critic. He believes in your genius, and his magazine has an enormous circulation among a high class of readers."

Without another word Socrates rose and went down the beach to where Jimmy stood mending his crab-nets. He stood there several minutes, and then came back, his face still flushed, his step light.

"Did you tell him?" Crofton asked.

"Oh no," Socrates answered. "I shall not tell any of them yet—not yet. It is too sacred. They wouldn't understand, anyway. They would think only of the money. They laugh at me for writing. But I shall tell her. She will understand. She will be very happy, too."

"You mean your mother?" Crofton asked.

"Yes, who else? I have no one else but her—and you, for you have done this, and I am going to beg you to do something else. I hesitate to do it, but I am afraid to act on my own judgment of my work."

"I should be glad to do anything you wish," Crofton said. "What is it?"

"I want you to look through my manuscripts again, help me improve them, and make the selections the editor wishes—that is, if—"

"Oh, I want to do that and right away—to-day, if you will let me."

"Are you sure it won't bore you?"

"Bore me? How could it? My boy, I'd give a year's time to it if it required that to help you. I can't tell you how delighted I am to assist you. Get the manuscripts now."

With a light step Socrates went to his tent and came out with his portfolio. "Let's go up among the rocks and trees," he suggested, his face beaming. "Oh, I'm in heaven this morning! I want to get down on the earth and hug it in my arms. I feel as if I could clasp its whole,

THE INNER LAW

round, delicious bulk, and squeeze it till it shrinks to nothingness. I feel—I feel as I think God must feel.”

They climbed the rugged hillside to the spot where Crofton had gone that day to take his life.

“Do you remember?” the boy laughed, joyously, “I first saw you there behind the vines and bushes. I knew then—I *felt* then that I was going to like you. There was something sad and lonely in your eyes that day. Something told me we were alike in some things and destined to lean on each other as true friends. I am doing the leaning so far”—he laughed again—“but the time may come when I may help you, also. I’d love to—I’d love to. I’m so much younger that you may need me later, if not now. Then I will try to repay you. You say you have no family ties. I am almost glad of that. Your coming here to the camp has been the greatest joy of my life, and just think what you have done and are doing!”

“It is not I, but your marvelous work,” Crofton insisted, seating himself on a flat boulder and opening the portfolio. “You would have won sooner or later, in any case.”

For hours that day, with their heads close together, they read the poems and discussed the various qualities they contained. Crofton suggested certain improvements in form and wording which the poet readily agreed to. The sun was going down when the task was completed, and with the selected poems in his pocket Crofton started back to the city.

“I’ll have them neatly typewritten and send them in the morning,” he said, “and you? What are you going to do? I fancy you won’t sleep much to-night. You see, I know. I was that way once myself, long, long ago.”

“I don’t expect to close my eyes,” was the laughing retort. “Sleep should be only for the unhappy. I don’t feel as if I shall ever want to sleep again. I am going

THE INNER LAW

to the city to-morrow. I am going to put on my best suit and take my mother out to dinner. I won't mention this at first. Then, suddenly, I'll astound her. I'm going to write my name on the back of that check, hand it to her, and watch her face. She needs several things which she can't buy because she gives away her earnings, and she can get something with it. I want the first fruit of my brain to go to her who gave me my brain and taught me all I know."

"It is fine of you to think of her first," Crofton said. "She will certainly be proud of you. I can imagine nothing which would please a parent more than to have a son meet just such success as has come to you."

Socrates blithely accompanied him down the path to the landing, often slipping on ahead like a happy child, and stood on the pier until he was seated in the boat. As he was being borne out upon the water Crofton looked back and saw him gazing after him. Socrates waved his cap and tossed it in the air. Crofton responded by waving his handkerchief. Then a sudden thought came to the lonely man, bringing with it a brooding sense of far-reaching despair. He thought of his own son, whom he was never to see, and the brave mother of that son from whom he had parted for ever. His spirits sank lower, his lips tightened grimly as he looked at the red sky-sea into which the sun was sinking. He leaned over the boat and trailed his hand in the cooling water.

"God have mercy on me!" he whispered. "Have mercy, have mercy!"

CHAPTER XIII

ONE afternoon, four days later, Crofton decided to visit the camp again. He had something of importance to tell his *protégé* about his poems. When he reached Dyckman Street, and started to the landing, he noticed that it was very cloudy and that a high wind was blowing from the north, and when he was in sight of the river, he saw that the water was very rough. Not a boat of any sort was in view save the little ferry launch, which rocked wildly at the side of the rising and falling float. A heavy mist sweeping down the river quite obscured the rugged shore opposite.

The brawny boatman stood with his red signal-flag in his hand, a dissatisfied look on his face.

"Going over?" Crofton asked.

"I don't care to, but I have to," was the reply. "I agreed to cross over and bring a man back, and I must keep my word."

"The water is rough, then?" Crofton said.

"I don't know that I ever saw it much worse," was the reply. "I can make it all right with this boat, but it will drink up plenty of gasoline. Do you want to cross?"

"Yes," Crofton answered. Somehow the very risk involved appealed to the despondent mood which he had been unable to conquer ever since his parting with Lydia.

"Well, I'll be with you in a minute. Say, that is a little fool there," pointing to a Jewish boy of slight frame, sallow complexion, and rather short stature, who was putting a camping outfit—a tent, stools, folded cot, and

THE INNER LAW

cooking utensils—into a small and shallow rowboat. “He says he is going to row across.”

“But he mustn’t try it,” Crofton said.

“Huh! You can’t advise his sort!” the boatman sniffed. “He is always doing that sort o’ thing. I’ve warned him my last time. He will go to the bottom like a rock one of these days.”

Crofton went to the boy. “You mustn’t try it to-day, my boy,” he said, gently. “It is terribly rough. It doesn’t look so bad close in, but the waves are very high farther out. A boat like yours couldn’t live in a squall like this.”

The pinched features of the boy produced a slow smile, and he shrugged his shoulders. “I can make it, all right,” he said. “The fellows are expecting me over there. They won’t have any shelter to-night if I don’t get this tent and other stuff over.”

“Well, take the ferry,” Crofton suggested.

The boy shook his bare, tousled head. “I go higher up than the ferry does,” he said. “Leave me alone, boss, I know what I’m about. That guy there is just talking because he wants everybody to cross with him. I can handle this boat, and I can swim some.”

He got into his boat, sat down, and jerked his short, clumsy oars into the worn locks. He thrust out his bare feet and made a confident side stroke which swerved the boat from the float. There was nothing for Crofton to do but to allow him to have his way. The ferryman had turned aside to see if any other passengers were in sight, and now came back, his eyes on the tossing craft.

“Rotten little fool!” Crofton heard him mutter. “That damned tub of his isn’t fit for anything but a mill-pond or a park lake. Say, there!” loudly calling against the wind. “Don’t be a blooming idiot—you kid! I know what I am talking about. You can’t pull against that

THE INNER LAW

tide and wind—six of your sort couldn't. Your fool soup-plate will be full of water in ten minutes."

"Bah! Come off!" the boy shouted back, derisively. "I don't need a cranky old gasoline-engine to pull me along like you do."

"He may go to hell, for all I care," the ferryman snorted. "There will be people around here that will blame me for letting him go out, as if I can 'tend to my work and run a kindergarten reformatory. Two boys about his size was drowned out there last Sunday—fell out of a canoe with a top-heavy sail to it and dragged each other down. Come ahead if you are going."

Crofton got into the boat. "Sit back in the stern," the man sharply ordered as he took the wheel. "You will get wet with spray in front, if you are not washed clean overboard."

After he had been seated and the boat was curving out into the foaming river, Crofton looked for the boy in the boat. The mist was thickening, and all but obscured the tiny craft and its inmate. Presently he saw them well out in the river. The boat was rising and falling with the waves, now in sight, now out of sight. The little oarsman had his thin back and the sharp point of his boat to the wind, and was pluckily pulling against the tide.

"He is in danger," Crofton remarked to the ferryman.

"You said it!" was the affirmative answer. "Now we are hitting it ourselves. The wind is rising."

Crofton started to stand up to look for the boy, but the boatman cried out: "Don't stand up! Sit where you are! You tip the boat!"

Crofton apologized and resumed his seat, his anxious eyes scanning the mist-swept billows. At times he saw, like a dark spot on a curtain of gray, the other boat and its occupant, and then they were lost from sight between

THE INNER LAW

the white-capped hills of water or in the swirling mist. Presently he could see them no more.

"Do you think that boy has gone down?" he asked the man at the wheel.

With a scowl on his heavy-cheeked face, the man hurriedly scanned the water. "I don't know," he said. "It wouldn't surprise me. Even you and I have no cinch, I tell you. It is worse than I thought it was. It is an awful squall. I hope my engine won't break down. Look out!" A wave dashed against the side of the boat and drenched them to the skin. The boat leaned over, rose like a bit of chaff in a wind, and fell with a thump and a groan in all its timbers. The boatman swore under his breath. "Can you swim?" he asked, doggedly.

"Pretty well," Crofton answered. "Is it as bad as that?"

"You never can tell," the man muttered, bending down to examine his clicking engine. "I'm all right myself, but I never know about a passenger. The life-preservers are under the seat. I'm only telling you that as a matter of caution. Say, if I was in your place I'd shuck off my coat and shoes. To tell you the truth, we are in pretty bad. The wind is rising, and this boat is none too steady. I'm all right, but I don't know about you."

"Don't worry over me." Crofton refused to act on his advice. "What do you think about that boy?"

"Damn the boy!" the man grunted. "Look out for yourself, mister. I don't like the looks of my engine. If she stopped, and the right sort of wave struck us, we might go over. Take off your coat and shoes. You couldn't swim ten feet in a strait-jacket like that with your shoes full of water."

Reluctantly Crofton obeyed. It was strange, after all, that he was really more concerned about the boy than he was about himself. As he kicked off his shoes and doffed his coat he peered into the swirling mist again. His heart

THE INNER LAW

bounded, for he thought he saw, in a wind-blown rift in the curtain of moisture, the boat with the boy still in it. With a throb of elation he announced his discovery to his companion.

"He hasn't struck the worst of it yet," was the curt reply. "He is not as far out as we are, but he will be soon. I wouldn't give a snap for his chance!"

Five minutes passed. They could not see the shore toward which the launch was sturdily forging its way. Crofton spoke to the boatman several times, but received no reply.

The man's troubled face explained his silence. Presently he drew a deep breath. "We are through the worst of it now, thank God!" he said. "We are all right, I guess. My Lord! mister, I didn't want to scare you, but I thought we were up against it."

In front of them was the long pier. The boat was headed for the sheltered cove it afforded on the leeward side. They landed safely.

"Going back soon?" Crofton asked, as he stepped ashore.

"Not on your life," the man smiled grimly; "not until this squall is over. I'll lie right here."

No one was in sight as Crofton took the path leading to the camp, and he met no one. It was beginning to rain, and he walked hurriedly to escape being drenched. Reaching the camp, he found it in a state of great excitement. Some of the tents nearest the water's edge were being flooded by the waves, and Socrates, Jimmy, and half a dozen other men were busy trying to construct a breakwater of stones and logs. Crofton at once set to work helping them.

"It is grand, isn't it?" Socrates said, as he greeted his friend. "It is like a storm at sea. You can't go back to-night. You will have to bunk with me."

"It looks like it," Crofton said, thrilled by the scene,

THE INNER LAW

the bustling activity of the others, and his part in it all.

Suddenly Jimmy called attention to a sound he had heard from the water.

"That is a yell for help, boys!" he cried, excitedly. "It is! It is!"

The workers paused, stood still, and listened. A faint cry was borne by the wind from the mist over the river. It was a piteous, short-lived scream of terror from a young throat.

Hurriedly Crofton told them of the boy and his boat.

"That's him!" Jimmy cried. "Poor kid! poor kid!"

The workers at the breakwater and the women and children ran up the beach toward the direction from which the sound came. It was heard again and again. So great was Crofton's excitement that he took no thought of Socrates. Suddenly, however, he heard Jimmy fairly screaming as he stood drenched to the waist on the sand, and, looking back, he saw Socrates pushing a frail green canoe into the water and climbing into it.

"My God! look at the fool!" Jimmy cried. "Don't do it, Soc! What is the use? Don't throw your life away!"

But the canoe, like a slender nutshell, was shooting out into the flood, forced by the double paddle of its muscular occupant. Crofton raised his voice in protest, but the youth did not even look in his direction. On he went, swaying back and forward, rising and falling with the surf.

"The last of *him!*" Jimmy groaned. "He doesn't care for his life. I've heard him say he wished he could die saving somebody. He's the cream of the earth—that guy is! Oh, my God! my God! Holy Mother Mary, save him!" It was a prayer from a fervent Catholic, and Jimmy covered his face with his hands, his lips mutely moving.

THE INNER LAW

Dumb and terrified, Crofton stood with the others and watched Socrates vanishing in the mist. Again the child-like cry was heard.

"The boy must be holding to his boat," a man said. "He couldn't swim in water like that. Hush! That's Socrates' voice!"

"Hold tight!" they heard him shouting, like a wind-torn echo of the other voice. "Keep your nerve, kid! I'm coming. I'm—"

What had happened? What had stilled the familiar voice? The terrified cry of the boy was heard again, but there was no reply.

"My God! Socrates is over!" Jimmy moaned. "Now they will both go down!"

The mist was lifting slightly. The watchers saw two blurred spots that looked like upturned boats thirty or forty yards apart, but whether human beings were clinging to them could not be seen. The angry tide was rapidly bearing them down-stream and farther from the shore.

CHAPTER XIV

IN a sheer spasm of despair Crofton told himself that something must be done, but he did not know what. Suddenly he bethought himself of the ferryboat he had just left, and without waiting to explain his intentions to the others, he dashed into the path and started toward the pier. It was fully half a mile over rough ground, but he tore along the way at the top of his speed. Fortunately he found the boatman at his launch. Breathlessly he explained the situation.

"Quick!" he cried. "Your boat! Any price you ask!"

"You don't mean Socrates? He's a friend of mine!" the man cried.

"I do. Quick!" Crofton was already in the boat.

"They are drifting with the tide, alive or dead. Hurry!"

"All right, I'm your man. I don't want your money. That young guy is my friend," the boatman said as he sprang into the launch. "Which way?"

"Out toward the middle and down-stream as fast as you can go!" Crofton cried.

The boat swung round and shot out into the mad torrent. Crofton strained his eyes, but could see nothing on the surface of the water.

"On, on!" he kept crying. "They must be there somewhere!"

"If anybody can keep afloat, Socrates can," said the boatman; "but it wouldn't be in a canoe; he has lost that already unless he is riding it."

Several minutes passed. Nothing could be seen but

THE INNER LAW

foaming water below, thickening mist around them, and lowering clouds above. The wind whistled by; the spray showered upon them. Suddenly Crofton called attention to a low, flat object ahead, and the boatman mutely steered toward it. It was the boy's upturned boat.

"That's the danged tub!" the boatman said, grimly. "Now their only chance is the canoe or swimming, and God knows that is slim enough!"

They passed the boat and sped onward, straining their eyes through the mist. The vague outlines of Fort Washington Point appeared on the left like the hulk of a great brown steamer, and immediately vanished. Presently Crofton descried a dark object just ahead of them. Was it a log, beam, barrel, or box, or was it an upturned canoe? It was impossible to tell yet, but the launch, like a bucking horse, was lunging toward it.

"I see a canoe!" Crofton shouted. "And two heads!" he added, pointing. "There they are!"

"Are you sure?" the boatman asked.

"Sure! Hurry! They are giving out!"

A little farther and Crofton plainly saw Socrates with one arm locked over the side of the canoe, the other around the boy, whose dripping head lay limply on his shoulder.

"Hold tight!" Crofton shouted at the top of his voice. "You are safe now."

He saw Socrates' lips move, but no sound issued. He was ghastly pale, and the eyes of his human burden were closed, the mouth open.

As the launch glided close to the canoe Socrates let go of it, and with one hand swam toward his rescuers. The next moment Crofton had him by the wrist.

"Take him in, quick!" Socrates said, hoarsely, as he tried to lift the boy upward. "I'm afraid he is dying!"

The boatman leaned down and drew the dripping lad from the water, while Crofton aided Socrates to climb aboard. The Jewish boy was laid on the bottom of

THE INNER LAW

the boat, and Socrates reeled to a seat on the side. He showed that he had not lost his presence of mind, for he pointed to the nearest boat-house, dimly outlined in the mist.

"There, there!" he gasped. "I'm all right, but he is in a bad fix. Plucky, plucky little kid!"

Crofton bent down and felt of the boy's heart. It was still beating, though faintly. Thinking that he had swallowed water, he was about to turn him over when Socrates stopped him.

"It isn't that!" he cried. "He is worn out. I've never seen such an awful fight for life as he made. It was twenty minutes before he and I could get together, and he couldn't hold to his boat. My canoe was upside down. I was afraid to let go, for that was our only chance. Sometimes he would be almost within an arm's length of me, and then be swept yards and yards away."

They were now near the float of one of the boat-houses. No one was on it, and the door of the house was closed to exclude the blasts. The launch slid up against the float. Crofton took the boy in his arms and got out. Though fairly sinking from weakness, Socrates sprang in advance up the creaking runway and opened the door. The wife of the man who kept the house met them. She uttered a short, surprised scream, and then commanded herself sufficiently to lead them up the steps to her apartments above, where a fire was burning in a cooking-range. Hurriedly she showed them a cot, and she and Socrates drew it near the fire. Crofton laid the boy on it, and as he did so the little fellow opened his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Good!" the boatman exclaimed. "He's coming out all right!"

The boy stirred and tried to sit up, but the woman gently pushed him back on the pillow she had taken from

THE INNER LAW

a bed behind a curtain. "Don't move yet, dearie," she said. "I want to give you a nip of whisky. It will do you good."

She hurried into the little bar below, and came back with a glass holding the liquor. The boy drank some of it and then waved it aside.

"I don't like it—it goes to my head," he said, and then, with an appealing glance at Socrates, he asked, "Say, is my boat lost?"

"I'm afraid it is," Socrates answered. "Never mind that now."

"My old man will beat me," the boy began to whimper. "He didn't know I had the boat out. He bought it for me, and told me to take care of it. And the things I was taking to the fellors—they are gone, too, eh? Oh, gee! What 'll I tell 'em? They saved their money all winter for that outfit—and me—me, I did it when you two fellers told me not to be a fool; but I was—I was, and I got it in the neck, didn't I?"

He was beginning to cry aloud, his little fists in his eyes. Crofton sat on the edge of the cot. He leaned down. "Hush," he whispered; "don't cry. I'll buy you a good new boat at once and replace the other things. You shall have them early in the morning, and you can take them right over."

"Say, whatcher giving me? Are you kidding?" the boy demanded, with an incredulous stare into the speaker's eyes, which he swept on to the face of his rescuer.

"No, I meant it," Crofton said. "Now be quiet and rest."

"Yes, he means it, kid." Socrates was seated in an easy-chair close to the range, drying his thin trousers, shirt, and stockings. He was still shivering and somewhat pale.

The woman brought him a cup of hot tea. "Drink it, Socrates," she said, smiling. "You don't remember me.

THE INNER LAW

I am Mrs. Myers. I saw you here with some boys one Sunday, and heard your name."

"I remember, Mrs. Myers." He smiled as he took the tea and thanked her.

Crofton was struck by his features, which his weakness and pallor were rendering more distinct. The outlines and a certain indefinable expression of the eyes reminded him of his brother Henry in his younger days. There was a vague something, too, in the poise of the body, the way the cup was held, the genial upward smile that recalled his cousin Tom during their college days when they used to serve tea in their rooms.

"You must let me keep the boy awhile," the woman said to Crofton. "He is all right now, but he must rest. I'll feed him and keep him here to-night. In fact, I have plenty of room for you all if you will stay. You are entirely welcome."

Crofton glanced at Socrates. The youth was smiling. "It would be a good idea," he said. "It is too rough to cross to-night, and we could go right over in the morning. Our friends will not know what has become of us."

So it was arranged. The ferryman was to go back to his work as soon as the wind fell, and he promised to report to the camp. Crofton had a vast sense of satisfaction in not being separated from Socrates. Mrs. Myers showed them a room at the head of the stairs, containing a wide bed and other furniture. Lighting a lamp on a table, she left them. The rain was beating fiercely against the window-sashes, which rattled in their loose frames, and the wind whistled dolefully under the eaves of the crudely built house. From the river came the sound of the fog-horn of a creeping tugboat.

Presently Mrs. Myers brought a most tempting supper on a tray, and put it on the table in the room.

"How kind of you, Mrs. Myers!" Socrates said. "You are treating us like royal princes."

THE INNER LAW

"Pshaw! It is nothing," she answered, beaming on him in a motherly way. "I only wish I could do more for you and any friend of yours. Look what you did for that poor little water-rat. He's been telling me about his mother, and how she worries over him when he is away. He is afraid she will find this out." Mrs. Myers's voice grew unsteady. "Think of the sorrow you've saved that poor woman from. I know, I know. I never had but one little boy, and he—he was drowned when he was only five. He fell off the float when my back was turned one day, and I did not know it till I saw his little body floating away. You are welcome any time—any time you are passing." Turning suddenly she left the room, her eyes filling with tears, her breast heaving.

"Poor woman!" Socrates said, softly. "Poor woman!"

The two friends heartily enjoyed their supper, and after it was finished, the storm being over, they went to the veranda overlooking the river. Suddenly, when they were smoking some cigars Crofton had provided, it occurred to him that he had not yet told his companion what he had to say in regard to his poems.

"I think I know what you are thinking about?" Socrates said, suddenly. "It is those poems you took. Did you send them?"

"No; I took them down in person."

"You did? You say you did?" Socrates exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes, and I am glad I did, for I was never better received in my life. The editor was eager to talk about you. He asked many questions. He and his associates read the poems while I was there and discussed them. They were all enthusiastic. The editor accepted them and—"

"Accepted? Are you sure?" Socrates broke in, excitedly.

"Absolutely. A check, and a good one, will be sent to

THE INNER LAW

you at the end of the week. I wish you could have heard all the editor said. He spoke as if I had discovered your genius, but I told him I had nothing to do with it."

"Nothing to do with it?" Socrates disputed. "Why, you did it all—absolutely all. I would never have sent him anything but for your encouragement and advice. I'll be in your debt always. Not only for those things, but for something else. You saved my life to-day."

"Oh no!" Crofton protested. "You'd have got in all right."

"No, I couldn't have made it," Socrates declared. "I was losing consciousness. I was all in. My arm which held the canoe was numb and giving way. Every wave wrenched it with the force of a powerful lever. I couldn't drop the boy. He spoke to me just before he fainted. He is an honor to his race. He said:

"'You'll drown if you hold me. Let me go. What's the use of both of us going under?'"

"And did you really think you were going down?" Crofton asked.

"I was sure of it. I know now that death is not a terrible thing when it actually comes to one. It may sound like boasting for me to say so, but I really didn't care at all. The thought flashed upon me that nothing in existence could destroy my soul. I was becoming dazed, everything was vanishing. The waves and mist were turning into some sort of light that I've never seen save in dreams. Just then I heard your voice shouting to me. That call seemed to bring me back to my body."

"So you believe in the immortality of the soul?" Crofton asked, deeply interested in the psychic phase of his friend's experience.

"Without a doubt," Socrates answered. "One minute more and I am sure I should have been experiencing something—a transcendental something which no one in the flesh has ever experienced, or can experience."

THE INNER LAW

"At that particular moment did your whole life flash before you, as so many have claimed as their experience?" Crofton inquired.

"No; I thought of nothing I had ever seen, done, or fancied before. Really I seemed to be quite myself, and yet to be on the verge of becoming a greater, wiser personality. I can't explain it. I feel what I want to say, but I can't—I can't express it in words. I seemed almost to be merging into God, who was not a person, but a vast, indescribable, ecstatic principle. It all seemed to lie out before me where that strange, supernal light was growing brighter. It seemed to be drawing me toward it, into it. I felt—I felt—I can't tell you how I felt. But I'm happy to-night. I am glad you saved me. Oh, I'm so happy over my poems! It seems too good to be true. You did it; you did it; and you saved my life to tell me of it."

"You said that you intended to tell your mother about the first acceptance. Did you?" Crofton asked.

"Yes," Socrates smiled, "but not till we were seated that night at dinner in the corner of the little café where we often go. Then suddenly I showed her the check and the editor's letter. I have never seen her so surprised and happy in my life. She read the letter a dozen times, and asked me scores of questions. But women are strange, strange creatures, aren't they?"

"In what particular way?" Crofton asked.

"Oh, in many intricate ways," Socrates answered, suddenly grown thoughtful. "One can never wholly understand them or get their peculiar point of view. My mother was always rather non-communicative, but the other night she mystified me more than ever. To be frank, I was almost alarmed. I couldn't understand her, and I could not get her to explain. She would not answer direct questions. One thing that puzzled me was this: she had said that she must positively get away from the café

THE INNER LAW

by eight o'clock to be with a patient who was quite ill. She had mentioned it two or three times, and had been looking at her watch and even urging the waiter not to delay our dinner, when all at once she seemed to forget her appointment. Eight o'clock came and passed, and she had not finished her dinner—she had scarcely touched it, although she had said she was hungry. I reminded her of her engagement, but she would not even talk about it. She was strangely agitated. She seemed even to forget my success, which had pleased her so much at first."

"You speak of your mother having a *patient*," Crofton said. "I thought she was in some sort of business."

"She is a private nurse," Socrates informed him. "She has been wonderfully successful. I really was alarmed that night, and began to wonder if her mind was deranged, for I saw no rational reason for her failing to keep an appointment which she had said was so important. We finally went to a telephone and she called up the doctor, who was then at the house to which she was to go. I could tell by her voice that she was excited to the point of hysteria. I heard her tell the doctor that she was not feeling well enough to come, and ask if he could send a taxicab for another nurse. He answered that he could without any serious consequences to the patient, and we walked home. She said the walk would do her good. I told her I was worried over the way she was acting, but she made no reply, and that was odd, too—it was not like her. She had taken my arm, and I felt her hand trembling."

"It was certainly very odd," Crofton observed. "Did you finally discover what had so disturbed her?"

"Not absolutely," the boy said, a touch of restraint in his tone. "The truth is, she is becoming as great a mystery to me as she was before—before I learned that sad secret of hers, and which she doesn't yet dream that I am aware of. She gave me no satisfaction that eve-

THE INNER LAW

ning. I was forced to surmise one thing only, and I hesitate to tell you about it—*you* in particular, of all persons.”

“Me? Do you really mean that?” Crofton groined.

“Yes, it seems wrong to say it of a woman who has so strong a character as my mother has, but I can account for her mood in no other way than that she is jealous. I did not know she was that way, but it must be that. I can’t explain it otherwise.”

“Jealous of whom?” Crofton wanted to know.

“Of *you*,” Socrates replied, with a faint smile and a shrug of his shoulders. “I am sorry to say that I am forced to think that your friendship and mine has actually made her jealous.”

“Our friendship?” Crofton exclaimed. “Why, aren’t you mistaken?”

“I don’t think I can be, for her whole agitation began when she asked me who the friend was to whom the editor referred as having forwarded my poem. I told her how you and I had accidentally met, and how often we had been together. Yes, she must be jealous, and to an abnormal degree. I didn’t dare tell her actually how much I think of you, and even now that you have saved my life and helped me with my other poems I may not be able to tell her of it. She acted queerly—queerly! She actually spoke—and it seemed to me anxiously—of our taking a trip to Europe at once, and begged me not to let any one know of it—said she had reasons which she could not tell me quite yet.”

“She must be a very strange woman,” Crofton said, regretfully. “I am sorry she feels as she does, for I am very fond of you and like your companionship.”

“And I yours.” Socrates leaned on the railing, looked out over the restless water, and sighed. “You have become almost everything to me. You are doing so much for me, and I am doing nothing in return. She must not part us. She will feel differently when she meets you.”

THE INNER LAW

"She might even object to meeting me," Crofton suggested, gloomily.

Socrates hesitated for a moment, and then: "There is no telling what she will think or do if her mood doesn't change. She clung to me in the hallway of her boarding-house that evening and sobbed in my arms like a desperate, broken-hearted child. I finally left her, but I am quite upset over it. You see, I did not really know what to do or say. I have had a letter from her every day since then, and they are not like her—they seem nervous, unnatural, and pointless."

At this moment Mrs. Myers came up the stairs to remove the tray of dishes, paused in the doorway, and glanced out at them. She smiled. "That little chap is asleep at last," she said. "He seemed too nervous to quiet down at first. My husband came back just now in a boat which one of our customers wanted him to sell for him at half price. The boy heard him speak to me about it and insisted on going out to look at it, weak as he was."

"I see," Crofton laughed, "he has not forgotten my promise, and is already looking the market over."

"I think that is it," Mrs. Myers smiled; "but when he heard that the price was twenty dollars, and saw what a fine boat it was, he gave it up. 'Gee!' he said, 'the guy that pulled us out o' the water ain't no Rockefeller.'"

Crofton laughed. "Well, he shall have the boat, anyway. Tell your husband I'll take it and will settle for it in the morning. You may tell the boy, too, that I'll give him the money to buy the other things."

"Really? Really?" Mrs. Myers cried in delight. "If he knew it now he would not sleep a wink to-night. Well, I'll tell him in the morning."

When they were alone, a moment later, Socrates glanced at Crofton, and observed: "Sometimes I fancy that you

THE INNER LAW

are not as poor as I at first thought; you are always spending money on others."

"Well, I have more means than I was willing to admit when I first met you," was the answer, "but I don't want to keep anything from you now. I want you to know me as I am. I am in comfortable circumstances financially. I have a strong premonition that we are not going to see much more of each other. If our friendship worries your mother it must not go on. She has been all the world to you, and you are all she has."

"It wouldn't be fair to you and me," the youth said, rebelliously. "It is only a whim of hers. I don't know how I could get along without you. I can't explain it. I love to be with you as much as with my mother. It seems to me that I have known you from babyhood up. Why, really, half the joy I have in succeeding with my poems comes out of my desire to please you."

Crofton was deeply touched. He stood smoking in silence. There was a break in the filmy clouds, and the moon, a great round white lantern, lit the surface of the river, bringing the long, dim outlines of the Palisades into view.

Presently Crofton said: "You are tired; perhaps we had better go to bed."

Socrates nodded acquiescence, and they went to their room. A cot and a bed were ready for them, both having fresh sheets and pillows, and looking very inviting.

"I'll take the cot," the youth said, quickly; and Crofton knew that it was out of courtesy to his age that he spoke. "I've slept on one all this summer, and I'd not feel at home in a bed, while you are accustomed to one."

They undressed, and Crofton noticed the bare right arm of his companion. It was black and blue from bruises, badly swollen, and he went to examine it.

"Why didn't you tell me it was like this?" he asked. "How did it happen?"

THE INNER LAW

"That blasted canoe," Socrates said, indifferently. "It is a wonder the blame thing was not cut to the bone."

"You must put something on it," Crofton said, considerately. "Let me ask Mrs. Myers—"

"Bosh! Rubbish! It is nothing at all!" the boy sniffed. "The swelling will go down by to-morrow. I'll not do any rowing or swimming for a day or two, that is all."

"You have a lot of nerve," Crofton said, as he went back to his bed. "I'm afraid your arm will pain you in the night."

"Oh, it may, a little bit," Socrates lightly returned; "but that's nothing. Shall I blow out the light?"

"If you are ready," Crofton answered, admiring the perfect physique of his companion as he walked to the lamp and extinguished it. "Good night," Crofton said.

"If your arm pains let me know."

"Thank you. I will. Good night."

CHAPTER XV

CROFTON lay with his eyes on the moonlight which fell in at the window upon the rough floor. How strange it was! he thought. His boyhood was flowing back upon him in a constant stream of scenes, incidents, and sayings. The room seemed to be the one in the old home in which he and Henry had slept as boys. One circumstance he remembered now for the first time in years. Henry had come in after midnight and waked him as he clumsily undressed. Half an hour passed. Henry was breathing heavily and, it seemed to his imaginative brother, with difficulty. Carter rose, went to him and spoke, but received no reply. He shook the sleeper, but could not wake him. Alarmed, he went to his father's room across the hall and roused the old man from sleep. Gilbert entered the room, bent over his sleeping son, roughly turned his face to him, and with an angry grunt moved away. "Drunk!" he said. "Can't you smell it on him?"

That was away back in Henry's youth, and now Henry, who, somehow, was dearer than ever before, was dead. He had lived his mistaken career out, and was now mere food for worms back there in the blue Georgian hills. The remains of young Tom Crofton—jovial, prank-playing Tom—were there, too, and those of his father, who had erred, suffered in consequence, and yearned so much for peace of soul. What could it all mean? To what was it tending—if to anything? The swash of the river's flow against the float and the piles which supported the house,

THE INNER LAW

the tugging of rocking boats on their painters outside, was the sole answer. An hour passed. Crofton could not sleep, and heard the creaking of the cot of his companion, who was constantly turning over.

"You are not asleep yet," he said, suddenly.

"Nor you, either," Socrates laughed, evasively. "I hope I am not disturbing you."

"Not at all," Crofton answered. "But I'm afraid your arm is paining you more than you will acknowledge."

"No, it is not my arm," was the answer. "It doesn't hurt much now, but somehow I can't get down to sleep. I was that way after a long-distance swim once. My nerves were strung high this afternoon; besides—besides, you know, there is something in thought-transference. I have read your mind often, you remember, and to-night—I may be wrong—but it seems to me that you are unusually sad—depressed, unhappy."

Crofton found himself unable to formulate a denial that would be satisfactory to himself, so he said nothing, but simply lay still, his eyes now on the boy's dim form.

"Of late," Socrates went on, sympathetically, "it has seemed to me that you have met with some new and particular disappointment. I have seemed to read it in your face and detect it in your voice. I wish I were worthy of your entire confidence. I think I have told you all about myself, but I feel that you have kept some things from me. I would not say this, but something tells me—it is almost like the strange, psychic voice I've heard once or twice in my life—something keeps telling me that I, young as I am, could help you—actually help you. God knows I'd like to if you need me in any way."

"Nobody on earth can help me!" Crofton suddenly blurted out. "This much I will say, and then we will drop the subject for ever. I wouldn't confess it to one so young, but for the hope that it may prevent you from making my mistake—that my terrible, lifelong remorse

THE INNER LAW

may be a helpful warning to you. My boy, the man you look upon as a friend worthy of friendship is not worthy of the friendship of an outcast dog. Listen. When I was about your age—when I was as full of high, pure aspirations as you now are, I sank to the very depths of human depravity. I was carried away by passion. I wrecked the life of the sweetest, loveliest girl ever created. She has since fought her way to the top, while in idleness, frivolity, pride, and vanity I was dragged down to what I am. I met her recently, after a separation of over twenty years. I now want her and need her more than I want and need life itself. I want to care for her and our son whom I have never seen, but it is impossible. She has shown me that it is impossible. After losing her, I began to lean on you for companionship, only to find now that even that is denied me. I'm not complaining. I deserve it all. At times, among poor, simple people here in the city, and with your friends across the river, I am able to forget myself in their honest, untroubled lives; but to-night I am face to face with my wretched self as I never was before. It seemed to me that I was rising to better things in your wonderful career, in living a new life in you and the triumphs which are before you, but that, too, you see, must end. I have sinned too long and too grievously. God is laughing at me—fool that I am—for hoping to find peace through the wronged son of another man, while I'm never to see my own face to face."

Silently, and in awe, the youth put his feet down on the floor, sat up, and then came across to the bed. He seemed checked by embarrassment for a moment, and then sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Oh, how it pains me to hear you say this!" he faltered. "For I want you to be happy. Somehow I feel to-night as if I can never be happy myself if you are not—as if all the world will be wrong if you are made to suffer longer."

THE INNER LAW

"You are very, very kind," Crofton answered, huskily. "I ought not to have told you what I have—young as you are—but it slipped out before I thought."

"Perhaps you have not wronged your son and his mother so much as you fear," Socrates went on in a brave, boyish effort at giving comfort. "I once thought I was wronged by my absent father, too; but since this great joy in the success of my poems and your friendship have come to me, I have begun to feel that the very shadows of my life were cast by the hand of God. I once thought I'd actually want to kill my father if I met him, but now—now it is different—oh, so different! I've come to understand—to see—that what seems to us mortals to be the worst in life is really the *best*. My poor, young father was not wholly accountable. His life and lines were laid upon him while he was ignorant of the law. My mother, an unsuspecting girl, received her burden on young and tender shoulders. Mine fell to me in the cradle. You have yours—we are all alike, and we are all the loved children of God being led onward and upward in ways we cannot understand."

"Do you think that—do you—do you?" Crofton's voice filled to overflowing and broke. "And could you actually forgive your father?"

"Yes, easily now. I'd like to see him. I'd like to comfort him if he needs it, and if he is living he will need it sooner or later, for repentance is demanded by the law. But you and I must not part. It can't be—it *sha'n't* be! Lying there unable to sleep, just now, another possible explanation of my mother's strange attitude flashed upon me."

"What is it?" Crofton inquired, eagerly.

"Why, it may be this. See if you don't think so. You see, as I told you, she still thinks I am ignorant of the true facts of my birth, and morbidly dreads my discovering them. May it not be that she is now afraid that the

THE INNER LAW

publication of my poems may, in some way, bring me to a realization of the truth?"

Crofton sat up. "It may be so," he said. "In fact, that seems more likely to me than your first supposition. No natural mother could object to her son's having a genuine and sincere friend. Let's hope it is that, and yet I cannot see any reason for her being quite so greatly disturbed. I think you said she was a private nurse. The unfortunate mother of my son took up that calling, and—"

Here Crofton stopped short, stared through the dim light at the profile by his side—the profile which had so often suggested that of his cousin Tom. He looked down at the long, slender hands of his companion. The fingers and the curving nails were like Tom's and like his own. "A private nurse!" he said to himself; "a private nurse with a nameless son who has the features of a Crofton! My God, my God!"

"I am sure you want to sleep now," Socrates said, starting to rise. He laid his hand on the older man's arm and gently pressed it.

"Wait, wait!" Crofton gulped, the room, his companion, and all visible objects seeming to whirl about him.

The youth paused, standing erect by the bed. "What is it?" he asked.

"Why, this—this—" Crofton's voice caught in his throat. "You have often spoken of your grandmother, who died when you were young. Was—was she the mother of your father or of your mother?"

"My mother's mother," was the answer.

"Your *mother's* mother? Are you sure, *absolutely* sure?"

"Why, of course I am!"

There was silence. The youth paused a moment longer, and then started back to his cot. "I'm keeping you awake," he said. "I ought to go out on the float and

THE INNER LAW

walk off my restlessness. What you have told me about my poems and all that excitement in the river is robbing me of sleep. Really," he laughed, "I'm too happy to sleep!"

"You have never told me where you were born," Crofton said, irrelevantly and with suspended breath.

"In New Orleans, but I remember nothing of the place, for we left it when I was less than a year old."

"New Orleans! New Orleans! What was your mother's maiden name?"

"Romley—Lydia Romley."

"Lydia Romely!" The name struggled for birth in Crofton's tight throat, and died there. The youth went on to his cot and sat down. Crofton still sat erect, staring with fixed eyes, his lips parted. "My God!" he whispered. "My boy! my son! my own son!"

"Gee! my muscles really *do* ache a little!" Socrates was softly laughing; "but I sha'n't disturb you any more to-night. I'll lie still from now on."

Crofton heard nothing of what he was saying. The sound seemed a meaningless voice muttering out of chaos. The bell of a passing steamer rang. Its yellow light flashed into the white light of the moon on the floor and walls. Crofton sank back on his pillow and tried to think—tried to pray—but he could do neither. His brain was lashed by threats, forebodings, warnings, dire memories.

"Merciful God help me—guide me!" he cried within himself. He rose, stood out in the floor, and went to the window which overlooked the river. It was now a broad, dancing sheet of reflected moonlight. He remained there in limp, reeling silence for a moment; then the creaking of the cot drew his eyes to his son, who was lying on his side, looking at him wonderingly.

"God help me! Oh, God help me!" Crofton prayed anew, and then, obeying a sudden impulse, he moved

THE INNER LAW

slowly to the youth and stood before him. He started to speak, but the words he was trying to summon to his aid refused to fall into proper order, and he simply stood over his son, his desperate gaze on the placid young face.

"What is the matter?" the boy asked.

Again Crofton started to speak, but failed, and, as a child might have done, he bowed his head and covered his face with his hands. His bosom was wrung and shaken by a sob which he was trying to suppress, and this the youth noticed.

"I see you are even more unhappy than I thought," he said, in a tone of pained sympathy. "I wish I could help you. I'd give anything on earth to be able to do it. I would—I would!"

"You are the only one in the world who *can* help me," Crofton said, huskily. "*You, you*, and no one else!"

"I? I? Then show me how; please show me how."

Crofton threw all discretion aside. He forgot the plans of the boy's mother. He forgot everything but his yearning love for the lad on the cot and his raging desire for forgiveness.

"My boy, my boy," he gulped, folding his arms and standing erect, as a brave soldier might to be shot under the sentence of a court martial, "I have just made a great discovery. It may pain you—it may stab you to the heart—it may make you despise me and desert me for ever—but I am your father, your own father!"

"*My father?*" The youth gasped incredulously. "*My father?*"

"Your father. Oh, my son, my son, my son! Pity me! Have mercy on me!"

In the dim light he saw the boy's animated, soulful face become rigid and pale; the lips were set, the brows contracted. Crofton's chin touched his breast, his eyes were closed. Remembering something the boy had once said, he pictured him in the act of springing at his throat

THE INNER LAW

and clutching it with his long, slender fingers. But as he stood thus, self-blinded, he became conscious that his son had not moved. He opened his eyes. The boy sat bent downward, his face in his hands. He was crying, his young shoulders shaken by the tumult within him. Crofton suddenly knelt beside him and put a pleading hand on the boy's knee.

"My fate lies with you, my son," he muttered. "Without knowing what you were to me by blood, I have loved you as a son. You have inspired me; you have given me faith. I have often thought you were Godlike; be Godlike in your mercy to-night. Forgive me, as your mother has forgiven me, and let me spend the remainder of my wretched life in your service and hers. I owe my all to you both, and I want to pay. I love you—my son, my son—my poor wronged son! My life, as it is, will not be enough, but let me give that to you and to her."

The boy was sobbing unrestrainedly now. He tried to speak, but could not, and, shamed by his weakness, he fell back and buried his face in his pillow. Crofton rose and crept back to his bed, where he sat still and wordless, at the end of his resources. It may have been his silence that helped restore the youth to calmness, for he sat up, wiped his eyes, hesitated for a moment, then faltered:

"You mustn't mind me—you mustn't misunderstand. I'm not disappointed. I'm not grieved; I'm only surprised; it is all so new—so unexpected!" He stood up and came toward the bed. "So you are my father, you, you of all men on earth? I've always dreaded meeting him—seeing him, fearing that I'd hate him alone of all men in the world, and yet here to-night I know that I love him as much as a son ever loved a father. It is not for you to help me; it is for me to help you, and I will, I will. I'm happy to-night—happier than I ever thought a mortal could be on earth. I now have everything—everything that I wanted."

THE INNER LAW

"Oh, I've wronged you—wronged you!" Crofton moaned. "I can't give you a name except by law, when I'm willing to give you my very soul."

"What is a name?" the boy half laughed, half sobbed. "I don't believe there are any names in Eternity, and this life, at its best, is only the crudest beginning of the life ahead of us. I'm happy, happy, inexpressibly happy to-night!"

Crofton rose and took him into his arms and pressed him to his breast. After that they said nothing more—not another word. Crofton went back to his bed, and his son to his cot.

CHAPTER XVI

THE next morning Crofton called at the boarding-house where Lydia was staying and sent in his card. A maid-servant invited him into a little parlor in the rear, and he waited there for Lydia to come.

"She said she would be down at once," the girl announced, a moment later.

He was not kept waiting long. Lydia was already dressed to go out, and hurried down. He saw that she was greatly agitated and even pale. When she had entered the room she glanced uneasily back into the hallway, and then deliberately closed the door. She turned her back to the window, where some plants were growing, and grimly faced him. He thought it significant that she had not offered her hand.

"I half expected you," she began, her beautiful lips trembling. "I have been crazy—insane! I haven't slept. I tried to find you to warn you, but could not. Do you know—have you found out?"

"That he is our son? Yes, by accident, and only last night."

"I was afraid you would betray me," Lydia ran on, desperately. "He happened to mention meeting you and your friendship for him. I was overcome with fear and despair, and yet I tried to hide it from him. I don't know what to do. I'm glad you came, for now we can agree on some plan. He must never know his father is alive. If

THE INNER LAW

he discovered that he would suspect the rest, and it would break his heart and kill his courage. Surely you know him well enough to know how such a thing as that would sting his pride?"

"Yes, but as it is—"

"Oh, he must never know!" Lydia broke in, desperately. "He is all I have. I have lived for him and for nothing else. He would despise me for my weakness, and for the part I have played in deceiving him all his life. He doesn't dream—he doesn't suspect, does he?"

Crofton could not meet the fierce stare in her great, suffering eyes. He looked away and was silent. Her face changed; her lips parted; she came toward him swiftly; she laid her two hands on his shoulders and bore down on them heavily.

"You can't mean—my God! you can't mean—you surely have not come here to tell me that you have let him suspect—"

Her voice failed to sustain itself; she clutched his arms as her hands slipped downward, and then she shook him.

"Don't dare to tell me," she caught her breath and ran on, "that you have thwarted my plans—stepped into my life again and ruined it?"

"Wait, wait! For God's sake, listen to me!" he cried, suddenly remembering something he had come to reveal. "Lydia, he already knew the truth. He has known it for several years and hidden it from you. He overheard you and your mother talking once when he was ill. He suffered under the discovery for a long time, but finally rose above it. He knew all but the name of his father. He confided all this to me some time ago."

"Oh, oh! is it possible? My poor boy! my poor darling boy!" She almost fell as she tottered toward a chair, caught hold of the back, swayed a moment, and then sank into it.

"Don't take it so hard," Crofton pleaded, hoarsely.

THE INNER LAW

"He is happy now, he says—happier than he has ever been. He loves me, Lydia; he has forgiven me. Oh, Lydia, I love him with all my wretched soul! You and I must live for him and make him happy. We can do it. He has consented to my adoption of him as a son under my name. He and you shall have all I possess in the world. You shall use my fortune as you like. You must be my wife. I can't live without you. I love you—I adore you. We'll go to California, where he says you wish to live. Oh, Lydia, it is all for the best! He says so, and, young as he is, he is as wise as a sage of old. Together we'll watch his growing fame and nurse his wonderful genius. He is going to have the thing I missed—a successful career. Tell me, dear, will you let it be so?"

A new light had dawned in the sweet face which she raised to his; her long lashes glistened with tears; a pink glow was rising into her pale cheeks. He bent down, took her into his arms, and held her to his breast; he kissed her pulsing lips; her head sank to his shoulder; she clung to him tenderly and sobbed.

THE END

**THIS BOOK IS DUE ON THE LAST DATE
STAMPED BELOW**

**RENEWED BOOKS ARE SUBJECT TO IMMEDIATE
RECALL**

LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS

Book Slip-Series 458

Nº 826501

Harben, W.N.
The inner law.

PS1787
I5

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
DAVIS

